The New Criterion

June 1999

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. June 1999, Volume 17, Number 10. Subscriptions: $36 for one year, $65 for two. Outside the United States, add $7 per year. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster and subscribers: send change of address, all remittances, and subscription inquiries to The New Criterion, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834. For subscription problems call (800) 783-4903. Copyright © 1999 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. Newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., One Media Way, 12406 Rt. 250, Milan, OH 44846. (800) 221-3148. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date. **Internet: http://www.newcriterion.com Email: letters@newcriterion.com**

Advertising: Galleries & fine arts: Fred Stern, 44 Paulin Boulevard, Leonia, NJ 07605. (201) 947-2674. Publishers & others: Richard A. Vaughan, 129 Phelps Avenue, Rockford, IL 61108. (815) 398-8569.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set in 10-point Galliard and is printed by Science Press in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, USA.

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Notes & Comments: June 1999

Over the line at Wesleyan

Here are a couple of facts about Wesleyan University, the elite liberal arts institution in Middletown, Connecticut, that has taken to calling itself "The Independent Ivy." Tuition, room, and board this year are $30,430. Assuming a student takes four classes a term, that works out to about $3800 per class. An astounding sum, yes, but not out of line with other top-rated schools. What do students get for their nearly $4000 per class? Well, lots of rhetoric about "diversity," "multiculturalism," and so on. That goes with the territory. They also get classes like COL 289, an "interdisciplinary" course in the College of Letters called "Pornography: Writing of Prostitutes." Taught by Hope Weissman, a medievalist who helped establish Wesleyan's women's studies program and who has taught at the university for some two decades, the course is one of the new-breed sex classes that have recently infested American universities, especially in the politicized intellectual slums populated by women's studies, gender studies, gay and lesbian studies, and kindred forms of academic grievance-mongering.

The official description of Professor Weissman's offering tells us the following:

> This course investigates pornographic literature as a body of discursive practices whose "materials," according to the cultural critic Susan Sontag, comprise "one of the extreme forms of human consciousness." The pornography we study is an art of transgression which impels human sexuality toward, against, and beyond the limits which have traditionally defined civil discourses and practices—defined, that is, by regimes of dominance and submission, inclusion or exclusion, in the domains of organ and emotional pleasure. Our examination accordingly includes the implication of pornography in so-called perverse practices such as voyeurism, bestiality, sadism, and masochism, and considers the inflections of the dominant white-heterosexual tradition by alternative sexualities and genders, as well as by race, class, age, mental and physical competence. We also attempt to identify the factors, intrinsic and extrinsic, which align the pornographic impulse with revolutionary or conservative political practices. But our primary focus is on pornography as radical representations of sexuality whose themes are violation, degradation, and exposure.

Where should we begin? This passage is at once so repellent and so utterly representative of the sort of thing being purveyed under the rubric of the humanities in American colleges today that it might well make it into a future *Guide to What Went Wrong in American Higher Education, c. 1960–2000*. The rhetoric alone is worthy of attention: the know-it-all tone, the neo-Marxist clichés, the general air of menace.

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This is course description as an exercise in ideological intimidation. We especially savored the use of the phrase "so-called": "so-called perverse practices such as voyeurism, bestiality, sadism, and masochism." What, we wondered, would Professor Weissman choose to call such practices?

The reading list for Professor Weissman's class included such delights as works by the Marquis de Sade and issues of *Hustler* magazine. But as befits a class dealing with "cultural practice," it also required student projects. According to one account, Professor Weissman proudly asserted that nothing would have been considered too extreme: "I push people over the line, whatever their line is, but only when I think they can go there and come back." Describing the final course assignment, she said: "I don't put any constraints on it. It's supposed to be: 'Just create your own work of pornography.'" A freshman named Abbie Boggs "avoided being overtly explicit," but nonetheless shot photos that "included oral sex with her ex-boyfriend." (When we wondered, did he become, *ex*?) We suppose that only at a time when the President of the United States has adjectival sex with a twenty-year-old intern in the Oval Office could such a "student project" be described as not "overtly explicit." Maybe this is the new modesty we have been hearing so much about: Another young woman made a film showing only the eyes of a male student as he masturbated (an homage, we presume, to Andy Warhol). Then there was a "performance piece" in which "a scantily clad female student bound her wrists with rope and asked others to flog her with a cat-o'-nine-tails."

Douglas Bennet, the president of Wesleyan, circulated a memo to the faculty questioning "the appropriateness of this course in the Wesleyan curriculum" and ordering a review. But the toothlessness of his response is clear from his administration's overall support of Professor Weissman (the official line: "one of Wesleyan's most dedicated, serious, and effective" teachers). In an effort to diffuse criticism sparked by this latest marriage of farce and perversity, the Wesleyan administration issued a statement making light of the whole affair. About the bound girl who asked to be flogged, for example, the statement reassuringly noted that "some of her classmates did, hesitantly, feebly, and to the general amusement of everyone, gently 'whip' her." But not to worry: "Nothing more serious than ideas were [*sic*] at stake."

While you are pondering the implications of that ungrammatical statement, rest assured that the Independent Ivy college in Middletown really is no worse than many other institutions. That indeed is the problem. As Constance Penley, head of the film studies department at the University of California at Santa Barbara, gleefully observed, "now pornographic film can be seen as a completely normal and necessary part of a film studies curriculum." Sarah Maine, the twenty-year-old student who made the film about masturbation mentioned above, put it more pithily: "Porn studies are very chic right now." Doubtless that is a great comfort to her parents or whoever is shelling out the $30,430 per year so that Sarah can acquire a B.A. at Wesleyan. As one student noted, most parents seem quite blasé about such classes. "Their best reaction is just to shrug and say, 'That's what kids do these days, they make porn at school.'" Classes on pornography do not set Wesleyan apart from its peers, any more than do appearances there by Annie Sprinkle, the former prostitute and porn star who visited Wesleyan early in May to celebrate the joys of prostitution and tell a group of several hundred students that "The answer to bad porn is not no porn, but to try to make better porn." Still, repellent garbage is repellent garbage, no matter how broadly condoned. One twenty-one-year-old student summed up the situation smartly when she observed of the class on pornography that "it's definitely symbolic of the kind of place Wesleyan is." In other words, *caveat emptor.*

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Incontinent moralism

It struck us as grimly appropriate that the reading list for Wesleyan's course on pornography should include Susan Sontag along with the Marquis de Sade and *Hustler*. The aging doyenne of radical chic seems to show up at every party where the protagonists "push people over the line, whatever their line is." It was not all that long ago that Miss Sontag was denouncing America as an evil imperialistic state that, "founded on a genocide" itself, seemed bent on exporting murder and mayhem to other parts of the globe. Not that Miss Sontag reserved her animus solely for Americans; white Europeans in general qualified for unbridled contempt. As she put it in one of her more memorable formulations, "The white race *is* the cancer of human history."

As far as we know, Miss Sontag never retracted that statement (though she later suggested that it might be unfair—to cancer). Yet the imperatives of seeming always more progressive than one's neighbor are stringent. So many causes, so little time! Who knows where the fickle finger of trendy smugness will next land: Vietnam, Cuba, Bosnia, Rwanda. . . ? At the moment, obviously, the digit of progressive anxiety is pointing unequivocally toward Kosovo. After all, Britain's prime minister recently declared that NATO's assault on the Milosevic regime was "the first progressive war." So how could Miss Sontag resist? She couldn't. A few years ago, while demonstrating solidarity with the oppressed of Sarajevo by staging a production of *Waiting For Godot* with her friend Annie Liebowitz, Miss Sontag declared that "Sarajevo is the Spanish Civil War of our time." In a way she was right: Sarajevo, like the Spanish Civil War, was an irresistible, miasma-producing magnet for pontificating moralism.

Yesterday Sarajevo, today Kosovo. It makes a kind of sense. And yet there is something vertiginous about the spectacle of Susan Sontag writing in *The New York Times Magazine* a few weeks ago about the wimps who worry about "Helpless Europe being dragged into a bellicose folly by Big Bad America." Asking "how can you stop those bent on genocide without making war," Miss Sontag concludes that "Europe needs its overbearing America."

Well, maybe it does. But the fact is that NATO's adventures in Kosovo (with accidental stops in Sofia and elsewhere) have generated more confusion than any foreign-policy gambit since Vietnam. That many conservatives agree with Susan Sontag, Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, and Bianca Jagger (to name only a few left-wingers who have lately turned in their dove's feathers for hawk's talons) only adds to the confusion. For us, NATO's bumbling (and, incidentally, illegal) aggression in Kosovo is a lamentable and extremely dangerous fiasco—"a foreign policy debacle," as Owen Harries, editor of *The National Interest*, put it in a brilliant Op-Ed piece in the *Times* on May 16. "It is true," Mr. Harries wrote, "that Slobodan Milosevic's ethnic cleansing is a barbaric thing. But contrary to what President Clinton now claims, until things seriously deteriorated after NATO's intervention, it was no worse than what he and other Western leaders had been able to bear with comparative equanimity in Turkey, Kashmir, Sudan, Rwanda—and Croatia."

That is perhaps small consolation. But when it comes to foreign policy, one is often faced with the choice between small consolations or none at all. In this sense, the "idealistic" option is also the irresponsible one. Thus it is that an incontinent moralism is often the enemy of the very things it professes to cherish. As Mr. Harries observed, "what is wrong is not the impulse to give foreign policy a moral content, but the presumption that doing so is an uncomplicated business, one not requiring calculation and compromise but merely purity of intention. Cheap moralists are as dangerous as cheap hawks—indeed they are often the same people." It is disconcerting to recognize just how large the population of cheap hawks has grown.

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The betrayal of liberalism: X

The moral consequences of impatience

by John O'Sullivan

When I see the spirit of liberty in action, I see a strong principle at work; and this, for a while, is all I can possibly know of it. The wild gas, the fixed air is plainly broke loose: but we ought to suspend our judgement until the first effervescence is a little subsided, till the liquor is cleared, and until we see something deeper than the agitation of a troubled and frothy surface. I must be tolerably sure, before I venture publicly to congratulate men upon a blessing, that they have really received one. . . . The effect of liberty to individuals is, that they may do what they please: We ought to see what it will please them to do, before we risque congratulations, which may be soon turned into complaints.
—Edmund Burke

Anarchy is a game at which the policeman will always beat the anarchist.
—George Bernard Shaw

In order to see where we are going, it might help to recall where we used to be. In mid-Victorian England, a group of illiterate workers in a Lancashire mill town hired a local teacher to give weekly public readings of Macaulay's *History of England*, at the time just published. At their close they voted to send a message of thanks to the historian for bringing the history of their country within the reach of uneducated working men.

Christie Davies, the Welsh sociologist, recalls the practice, still in use at the turn of the century, whereby itinerant manual workers would carry their "character" with them —a written document signed by previous employers testifying to their sobriety, diligence, and reliability.

Between the Boer War and the First World War, my own grandfather managed a public house in the Liverpool Dock Road, frequented mainly by dockers. My grandmother sometimes served behind the bar. On only one occasion did a customer use foul language in her presence, at which some of the "regulars" took him aside for a quiet word. He returned and apologized.

These three tales of Victorian respectability and aspiration do not, of course, exhaust the full range of working-class experience of those days. Reports of the squalor of Victorian slums, the number of London prostitutes, or the poor physical condition of British Army recruits in 1914 will balance the picture. But they describe the direction in which English, American, and continental European societies were travelling one-hundred years ago—and even the moral and cultural solidity which they had already achieved. F. Scott Fitzgerald makes the point retrospectively in a much-quoted passage from *Tender is the Night* about a First World War battlefield:

> See that little stream—we could walk to it in two minutes. It took the British a month to walk to it—a whole empire walking very slowly, dying in front and pushing forward behind. And another empire walked very

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> slowly backward a few inches a day, leaving the dead like a million bloody rugs. No Europeans will ever do that again in this generation. . . . This took religion and years of plenty and tremendous sureties and the exact relation that existed between the classes. . . . You had to remember Christmas, and postcards of the Crown Prince and his fiancée, and little cafés in Valence and beer gardens in Unter den Linden and weddings at the *mairie*, and going to the Derby, and your grandfather's whiskers.

Fitzgerald seems here to be writing mainly about the middle classes of Europe. But the moral self-improvement of the working man was a still more telling indicator of social and cultural health. Christie Davies describes the period from 1870 onwards as "Respectable Britain" when crime and its female equivalent, illegitimacy, fell to very low levels where they remained until the almost comically symbolic year of 1960. Whether or not they saw it in such terms, most working people lived by middle-class values (none more so than the young people in the Labour movement) and, where they could be afforded, by middle-class tastes. In that period there seemed to be an upright piano in the front parlor of most comfortable working-class homes, signifying that respectability had been attained but that a further level of cultivation had now to be climbed. And though a passion for self-improvement may not ultimately be the best motive for aesthetic appreciation, for many people it is an indispensable starting point. Many working-class children were thus forced to learn the piano, and some did. A children's encyclopaedia was an invariable Christmas present or school prize. (My own parents were mortified when I insisted on a Billy Bunter book as the speech-day prize for English literature, but the archbishop who handed it to me seemed envious.) And the novelist Keith Waterhouse remembers that, when he was a relief mailman in his school vacations, he would regularly deliver two or three subscription copies of journals such as *Argosy* or *John O'London's*, with their short stories, criticism, and literary competitions, to working-class estates.

It is easy to poke fun at the modest standards of moral and cultural attainment sketched here. There is a long tradition of intellectual condescension towards the aspirations of the respectable. But as Samuel Butler pointed out, those who scorn respectability as a tepid imitation of real virtue usually turn out to be the same people who cannot meet its unexacting demands. Clive James noted similarly in a *New Statesman* review that while American intellectuals stressed Kennedy's superior musical tastes, illustrated by his supposed love of Vivaldi, it was Nixon who could actually play the piano. The point in both cases is that the existence of the best should not blind us to the good. Such modest efforts become the entrance ticket to a richer world of disciplined achievement and high culture. As the twentieth century began, the mass of people in America and Northern Europe—who a few generations before had been either illiterate agricultural peasants, almost outside history, or the wretched factory workers, soaked in gin and laudanum, of the early Industrial Revolution—were queuing up to enter it in a sober and grateful spirit.

Notice that these were the children of an incontestably liberal civilization. Nineteenhundred was in the immediate aftermath of Gladstonian liberalism in Britain and of the Gilded Age in America. As Marx had predicted (in *The Communist Manifesto*) and as Keynes later boasted, the entire globe had been brought within the capitalist world market and, as a result, the ordinary housewife could buy raisins from Smyrna, coffee from Brazil, and lamb from New Zealand at prices lower than she would have had to pay for poor local produce only a few years before. The wealth created by this enterprise did not go entirely in conspicuous personal consumption. It went to collective cultural consumption as well—to found new universities like Stanford in California and the

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humbler "redbrick" ones in England; to support social work missions to the heathens in the West's own slums; to build new concert halls and galleries; to establish charitable and educational foundations that would ultimately pioneer large-scale social change; and to plant a library in almost every town and small city in the civilized world. The governments that presided over this cultural flowering were themselves modest affairs; they governed lightly and taxed cautiously. Admittedly, barrack-square regimes with impolite policemen did control parts of Europe, but they were felt to be passing. To most people, the future seemed to belong to the Protestant constitutional democracies of Anglo-America (and their imitators) where churches, colleges, businesses, and private associations of every kind stood independent of the state; where the great professions regulated their own conduct; and where the reigning ideas were parliamentary democracy, free trade, natural rights, and progress.

And there was thought to be a connection between the self-improvement of the people and the negative liberalism of the Gladstonian state. People were self-reliant, individually and collectively, in part because the government refrained from providing for them in distress except in the austere conditions of the workhouse. The deterrent effect of the workhouse was reinforced by a strong moral stigma attached to taking "charity." Accordingly families, churches, schools, and charities all labored to instill not only the "the three R's" in the young, but also high standards of cleanliness, Christian morals, persistence in work, sobriety, regularity, and trustworthiness that would equip them to survive and prosper in a free society with a skimpy safety net. (As late as the 1950s the teacher in my elementary school examined our nails each morning to see if they had been properly scrubbed.) As Burke famously expressed it:

> Men qualify for freedom in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites. Society cannot exist unless a controlling power is put somewhere on will and appetite, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without.

Even at their zenith, however, the ideas of liberalism were already under attack, as Keith Windschuttle's essay on "Liberalism and Imperialism" (number four in this series on the betrayal of liberalism, December 1998) elegantly demonstrated. There was, after all, the "submerged tenth" of paupers who stubbornly refused to better themselves and whose visible presence was an affront to the social conscience of others. Even many of the working poor were generally too poor to make such long-term investments in their future as education. And other nations, with seemingly more dynamic economies and social structures, were rising to challenge the liberal empires. Greater state intervention in education, manpower training, apprenticeships, science and engineering education, welfare policy, and much else on the German model seemed to offer the short-cut to social betterment—"perfection as the crow flies" in Michael Oakeshott's mordant phrase—that would in turn strengthen the imperial state.

This new anti-liberalism emerged across the political spectrum. The "Efficiency" movement in Britain brought together Fabians and Tories, both impressed by Germany's combination of science-based industries, social insurance, and manpower planning. Tory imperialists like Milner and Chamberlain sought to finance such social reform without higher taxation by imposing an imperial tariff system borrowed from the German economist Friedrich List. In America the Progressives, and in Britain the Fabians, agitated for greater state direction of the economy and "municipal socialism." Hegelian "New Liberals" like T. H. Green sought to justify such innovations in liberal terms by defining liberty not as freedom from the state but in Windschuttle's words as "something delivered through the state." Nietzsche had followed God and was already dead, but not before he had set about

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undermining the philosophical foundations of the traditional religion, moral restraints, and natural rights that underpinned Gladstonian liberalism. Poets and artists as various as W. E. Henley, the Vorticists, Wyndham Lewis, and Filippo Marinetti expressed a new fascination with violence, machinery, war, imperialism, "the angle" (in contrast to Art Nouveau's sinuous curve) —and a dangerous boredom with the Gladstonian ideal of a commercial peace. And in the hurly-burly of everyday politics, as George Dangerfield later mourned with promiscuous irony in *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, liberals found themselves assailed by the House of Lords over taxation, by Unionists over Ireland, by Tories over the response to Germany's naval shipbuilding program, by women over the franchise, and by socialists over labor rights—some employing violent physical tactics, others threatening rebellion, and all exhibiting a startling contempt for the liberal state as a timid obstruction to either justice or glory.

Insofar as one can judge the mental atmosphere of the late Edwardian period from histories, novels, and memoirs, it seems to have been marked by excitement, irrationalism, and, above all (as Oakeshott's phrase suggests), impatience. The sober virtues of a responsible liberalism seemed dull and confining. Its reliance on the self-improvement of the people to make their own social betterment took too long. In a phrase that would later come into currency, people wanted the government to tackle social problems head on "like a military operation"—though, as the late Colin Welch used to ask in reply, "do they know how the Army actually works?" Perhaps, underneath all this activism, they were simply bored with the long prosperous peace and wanted a smash-up—which, of course, they got. America, which had had its own smash-up fifty years before, lagged behind almost all of these developments—economic, moral, cultural, and philosophical. It was more resistant than England to List's economics, Hegel's philosophy, Nietzsche's morality, and von Moltke's realpolitik. In the end, though, it took part not just in the smash-up of the First World War but also in the long smashing-up of liberalism that followed it.

As it turned out, the ideas of liberalism proved almost as robust as Rasputin. Just as it took poison, a shooting, and a forcible drowning to finish off the Mad Monk, so it took two world wars, Communism, Fascism, and a world-wide Depression to drive classical economic liberalism to the margins of politics. Not that it was responsible for any of these ills, but it was effectively blamed for them. Still, by 1945, the bureaucratic state had firmly established itself in Britain as the director of the economy and social welfare, and classical liberalism had so faded that the two institutions with the strongest hold over public sympathies were the National Health Service and the BBC. Franklin Roosevelt was the patron saint of a similar shift in America. But it never went as far in the United States where, as David Gress points out in *From Plato to NATO*, both capitalism and religion were more securely rooted in popular sentiment and thus more powerful obstacles to bureaucratic power—and which was enjoying both a long boom and a first taste of superpower status. With the Medicare and anti-poverty programs of Kennedy and Johnson, however, America resumed its progress down the same path.

Both countries seemed to have reached a broad new synthesis by the mid-Sixties, though at different points along the spectrum. The state had taken considerable powers to direct economic life, but this had apparently had little effect on the moral life of the people: families remained stable, illegitimacy was low, the work ethic was intact, and popular culture celebrated the bourgeois virtues with perhaps too much complacency. American culture, high and low, was especially vibrant with Hollywood dominating films and television; New York the new capital of modern painting; Broadway producing both good middle-brow

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drama and musicals like *West Side Story*; the American novel absorbing Jewish and Black influences from Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, and James Baldwin; and the Ivy League universities clearly dominating scholarship, in particular science, with generous help from the Federal government. In retrospect it seems a paradise. To many people, indeed, it seemed that way at the time.

But observers as different as Henry Fairlie and Norman Podhoretz were picking up some unsettling signals from the ether. There was an inchoate dissatisfaction with America's pleasant but settled life. Fairlie argued that the spread of Freudianism during the sober Eisenhower years paved the way for the Sixties revolution: its popularity suggested discontent with conventional existence, and its logic undermined conventional accounts of life's purposes. Norman Podhoretz, as he explained in *Breaking Ranks* and more recently in *Ex-Friends*, felt unsettled. And, as editor of *Commentary*, he set about exporting that unease to a wider audience by publishing such radical moral libertarians as Paul Goodman and Norman O. Brown. The message of all this was that liberalism—the dominant philosophy of the American age—was beginning to seem complacent, conformist, and uncreative. Life under its bland aegis was lacking in any zest or flavor. Corporations, universities, churches, and foundations had lost any real sense of mission as they had grown in wealth and influence. And young Americans were being prepared for dull, mechanical, unspontaneous lives in a world governed by such anti-human forces as computers, bureaucracy, and behavioral psychology.

There is a telling lack of specificity in these complaints, but a flavor uncannily similar to the mental atmosphere of late Edwardian England—desire for excitement, irrationalism, a sense of frustration, impatience with counsels of prudence. Until the Vietnam War came along, however, these emotions were not attached to any great political cause, unlike the anti-liberal upsurge of the 1900s which was at least directed towards real problems such as poverty and labor unrest. A common quotation before Vietnam, indeed, was from John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*: "There aren't any good, brave causes left."

As the Sixties gathered momentum, however, the real nature of the rebellion began to take shape before our eyes with the rise of the student movement, feminism, gay liberation, Black power, the hippies, and the marijuana legalizers. It was the application of excitement, irrationalism, and impatience to personal life—a reluctance to abide by the rules and entrenched habits that attend any ordinary life and career—resulting in a general antinomianism. These rules that allegedly forced people to lead gray flannel lives, bereft of playfulness and imagination, were imposed for the benefit of corporate America and the supposed "needs" of a capitalist economy. And because the institutions imposing these rules were liberal ones—in particular the university—liberalism itself was identified as the source of a weary oppression and called upon to reform itself in order to advance genuine human "liberation."

Shorn of its conspiratorial and revolutionary rhetoric, this critique was not wholly false. It was Burke's argument turned upside down and cast in a negative light. The logic underlying it was that self-reliant and trustworthy (also called "puritan" and "uptight") people were needed to work a capitalist economy effectively, but that the sacrifices needed to sustain such virtues were both intolerable and needless in a country as rich as America. Properly distributed, America's wealth would enable everyone to live the good life without the tiresome necessity of being a good employee, a good husband, and a good father for forty years. As both the Marxist Herbert Marcuse and the unclassifiable Charles Reich prophesied, the state as provider would remove the need for Burke's internal chains upon appetite. We could go directly to bliss without paying the lifetime subscription.

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And what was true for America was almost equally true for the rest of the world. A new economic order would allow the Third World to enjoy more of the fruits of its labor that the behemoth of corporate America unjustly expropriated. The failure to provide such international justice largely explained the peasant revolutions against the U.S. and its corrupt *comprador* allies that had produced Cuba and Vietnam and would shortly produce "one, two, three . . . many Vietnams." As Leopold Labedz neatly summarized the revolution's overall economic logic in *Survey* magazine: "The revolution of rising expectations was replaced by the expectation of rising revolutions." All that was needed for benign transformation of history, at home first and abroad later, was for mankind to cast off the distorting spectacles of race, sex, class, religion, the work ethic, the puritan spirit, and so on. Those who refused to do so were taking the side of superstition and repression—whether they called themselves liberals or, more candidly, conservatives.

This analysis was not, of course, as fresh as its advocates imagined. There have always been those who believed in short cuts to a paradise on earth. Liberalism in particular has been divided into two camps: those liberals like Adam Smith and de Tocqueville who wished to free men from external tyranny, and those like Mill and the French Revolutionaries who wished to liberate man from the tyrannies of custom and superstition as well. F. A. Hayek made this distinction clearly in his essay "Individualism, True and False," pointing out the paradox that liberating people from their own beliefs generally requires a good deal of external tyranny. More recently, David Gress has outlined how the "radical enlightenment," which sees history as something to be struggled against, and the "skeptical enlightenment" of Hume, which sees it as the source of real but imperfect freedoms, have formed the main ideological choices since 1789. The skeptical liberals in these battles have not been the partisans of superstition and custom. They have argued, as John Silber argued in "Procedure or Dogma: The Core of Liberalism" (May 1999), in favor of procedures of free debate and inquiry, so that people will then discover for themselves whether their beliefs are baseless superstition or embody some practical wisdom. And if they gradually shelve old ideas in favor of new tastes or are drawn into nontraditional ways of living by the availability of new technologies, they will have been converted more sincerely, permanently, and with the minimum of civil strife—even if the process takes a little longer.

Still, if the theory underlying the Sixties revolution was familiar, its rhetoric was fresh, indeed naïvely so, owing more to Shelley's ecstatic welcome to 1789 than to Marx's more analytical style of preaching. Here was "the wild gas" of liberty unrestrained by liberalism's boasted skepticism, coolness, or Trillingesque doubt, the raw spirit of liberalism without its procedures, institutions, checks and balances, all the heady undiluted emotions that liberal professors had warned against when McCarthyism was on the rampage. Here was the long-abandoned dream of the American Communist Earl Browder: liberalism in a hurry.

Real events and social developments in the postwar world lay behind this upsurge of theory: mass higher education; the greater participation of women in the workforce; geographical mobility; the invention of the Pill; the automobile (which neutralized sex inhibitions almost as much as it did distance); Christian ecumenism and other examples of the softening of religious differences; the erosion of class barriers; the invention of "youth" as a category with its own tastes and spending power; the spread of a national culture (which overwhelmed regional loyalties and the influence of local elites) by television and the movies; the rock 'n' roll revolution with its implicit junking of adult and parental authority; and, above all, the example of the Civil Rights movement—

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strictly speaking a Fifties phenomenon that had accomplished its main goal by 1964—which nonetheless significantly weakened the opposition of middle-class America to civil disobedience as a political tactic. Of course, American society would have adapted itself and its common doctrines to these changes in any event. But it may not have been so influenced in its adaptation by the liberationist ideas of the revolution—if it had not been for one further development.

Liberals in the most exalted positions, from Doctor Spock to Stephen Spender, turned out to be almost as intoxicated by the wild gas of liberty as the young students. Honorable exceptions there were, of course, but in the main university presidents, public intellectuals, historians, poets, congressmen, newspaper pundits, television anchormen, even "hard-boiled" newspaper reporters all rushed to defend "the kids" and to echo their arguments. Even when they begged to dissent from particular doctrines or to disavow particular illegal acts, they were careful to stress how much they admired the idealism that had inspired them. They gave every indication, indeed, of feeling morally inferior to what was now invariably called "the best generation of young people" that America had ever had. Their tribute to that youthful idealism was to provide a raw radical revolutionary spirit with sophisticated liberal justifications, intellectual respectability, and "new ideas."

Properly speaking, there are almost no new ideas. There are only old ideas, left lying around long enough to have been forgotten, which are made suddenly relevant by events in the real world. Lady Thatcher's program of liberal economic revival would have gotten nowhere if Britain's postwar social democratic consensus had not collapsed into hyperinflation and industrial anarchy, making her solutions, previously denounced as a return to primitive laissez-faire, seem like realistic economic commonsense. Similarly, if they were to justify this upsurge of antinomian radicalism, its liberal supporters would have to ransack the attic of political philosophy for such miscellaneous tomes and treatises as fitted the job.

Not surprisingly, they were unable to discover much supporting argument in the works of those philosophers from the skeptical liberal tradition—de Tocqueville, Constant, Hume, Smith. In effect, these writers have now been surrendered to the conservative tradition where they are less of an embarrassment to post-Sixties liberalism. Liberals did not even have the wit, in their anti-Vietnam philippics, to cite Burke against America's liberal universalism (as persuasively explicated in this series in April by Robert Kagan in "History Repeating Itself: Liberalism and Foreign Policy") and claim that the Vietnamese should be governed on their own principles rather than upon ours. Quite the contrary: they argued that North Vietnam already was governed on American principles of liberty and equality from which America had sadly fallen away. That is not international relations; it is conjuring.

And when we look at the philosophers who actually were conscripted to justify Sixties radicalism—principally Rousseau, Marx, Mill, and Nietzsche—two things about them stand out. First, except for Mill, none of them can be described as liberal without severe qualification (and the Mill of "On Liberty," as Roger Kimball carefully established in his essay "One Very Simple Principle" [November 1998], was a philosophic radical before anything else). Second, since they very rarely agree with one another, any philosophy that they can be plausibly claimed to support must itself be a highly variegated and inconsistent one. And indeed the liberalism that emerged from the Sixties was a magpie collection of disparate themes united not by any logic of liberty but by the changing political demands of the coalition of welfare bureaucrats and "identity" radicals (feminists, gays, Blacks, Hispanics, etc.) that has usurped the liberal name.

Moral arguments relieved of the burden of consistency become a disguise for these interests. Thus, as Jean Bethke Elshtain points

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out in her essay on liberalism and religion (March 1999), "liberal monists" drawing promiscuously on Mill and Rousseau, argue that religious justifications for public policy have no place in the public square which is reserved for debates in which all can join on equal terms—allegedly debates conducted in secular terms. Or, as Hadley Arkes demonstrated in his essay on liberalism and the law (January 1999), the natural rights tradition that had underpinned both liberalism and the U.S. Constitution is thought by judges to have been refuted by skeptical philosophy deriving ultimately from Nietzsche's claim that there is no basis for moral absolutes. The legal positivism built on the ruins of natural rights and moral "absolutes" has led to an extreme subjectivism in legal judgments. But those judgments, though subjective, have not been entirely random. Partial-birth abortion has been held to be the exercise of a constitutional right even by judges who acknowledge the difficulty in distinguishing it from infanticide. Flag-burning and obscene language have been similarly protected by judges who affect to be unable to tell them apart from lyric poetry or literary criticism. Yet when the zeitgeist (and *The New York Times*) wanted action taken against shops selling pornographic "literature," bad faith circumvented the First Amendment, and they were put out of business on grounds of zoning.

Within a short time, however, lifestyle radicalism and its consequences were largely entrenched in law as rights of one kind or another. It was then a short step for liberals under the influence of philosophies stressing will and power—but a giant step for liberalism itself—to insist that radical lifestyles be protected against criticism as such. This was not the first time that liberals had embraced progressive forms of coercion. Robert Conquest describes, in his essay "Liberals and Totalitarianism" (February 1999), how liberals visiting the Soviet Union were so entranced by the myth of Marxist revolution that they lavished praise on social conditions far worse than those they denounced at home: clergymen were impressed by anti-God museums, electoral reformers assented to the dictatorship of the proletariat, and so on. They became, in Orwell's phrase, "renegade liberals."

Some renegade liberals, indeed, go further, claiming that religious institutions must arrange their internal structures to conform with the secular liberal principles that American democracy has adopted. The Catholic Church is already obliged to hire overt homosexuals in its charitable activities in conformity with the ethnic and gender proportionalism now enforced on almost all institutions. Might it not one day be compelled to ordain women priests as well? Yet even when the principles to which we are asked to conform are genuinely liberal ones, which the above examples are not, the insistence that private bodies be compelled to assent to ideas they consider objectionable (or sinful) smacks unpleasantly of totalitarian control. And, indeed, the basic liberal notion of "tolerance" itself has been transformed. Where it once meant a willingness to tolerate ideas and behavior of which one disapproved, it now means an obligation not to criticize them openly. Criticism itself would be intolerant—a form of bigotry in Mill's terminology—and open to censure. Tolerance thus becomes a device to elevate certain liberal ideas and constituencies above public criticism rather than trusting that they will eventually emerge victorious on their merits in open public debate.

Renegade liberalism is seen at its most impatient and peremptory, however, in the justification that liberal law-making by the courts is necessary because "the legislature has failed to act." In reality, the legislature has acted by rejecting or refusing to consider the matter in question. What the justification assumes is that the proposed reform is a moral or historic necessity which Congress (and the voters) are not really entitled to reject. If they do so, the courts must put the matter right. That is the arrogance of power.

By dint of being endlessly repeated in public debate, much of this distorted liber-

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alism has entered the public's subconsciousness where it has doubtless undergone further distortion. To what effect? Have these ideas shaped a new liberal American morality at a popular level? If so, what does it resemble? And how can we see and judge it?

We get a surprisingly accurate indication from the Jerry Springer television show and similar entertainments. These have been dismissed as the modern equivalent of circus freak acts. They are certainly that. Even so, the extreme nature of the dilemmas presented ("She's Having *Her* Baby!"), implausible though they may be, force people to justify their actions in moral terms and allow others to comment on them. And there is an implicit morality running through these shows which can be readily extracted less from the contributions of the guests than from the reactions of the audience and the final sermon from Mr. Springer. Among the moral principles that regularly obtain audience endorsement are the following:

1. Harming another person is an indisputably bad thing, and you should try to avoid it, for example, by not sleeping with a new lover before you have left the old one.

2. Harming yourself is probably silly, but that's up to you.

3. It may seem sick, perverted, or unhygienic to you, but tastes differ.

4. Disapproving of other people is hurtful to them and bad karma for you.

5. Power is the underlying reality in all relationships. So make sure you get your fair share of it!

6. Nature is no barrier to your wishes, except perhaps for immortality. With modern technology, you can be whatever you desire.

7. Self-esteem is the key to achievement.

8. Other people are no better than me.

In other words, what we have here is a scrambled mixture of Mill, Marx, Nietzsche, Foucault, Californian psychobabble, and Dale Carnegie, with a dash of puzzled resentment at the unfairness of life thrown in. The last three items are native-American products, but even in this vulgarized form the message of the philosophers is recognizable through the medium of schlock-TV. Here are experiments in living that would horrify and astonish Mill but in which the participants display a third-hand familiarity with his principles as they swap wives and partners. In between biting, scratching, and kicking each other, they express skepticism about moral fundamentals as shrewdly as Nietzsche and unmask the true power structures inside the family with Marx's savage indignation. And they deconstruct gender relations without a moment's thought, which is more than can be said of Foucault.

What is being laid bare by Mr. Springer, of course, is the life implied by Sixties liberalism. Like M. Jourdan speaking prose, Mr. Springer's guests have been philosophizing all their lives without realizing it. And though their choice of philosophy may have been dictated by their vices rather than the other way round, it is significant that their vices dictated that particular philosophy and not another.

It is therefore at least a reasonable supposition that the debased post-Sixties liberalism they embraced might foster unhappy, disordered, and impoverished lives more generally. And, as we now know from the experience of the last thirty years, that is exactly what it did. In what Francis Fukuyama calls the "Great Disruption," rates of crime, illegitimacy, family breakdown, and divorce all began to rise rapidly and steeply, beginning in about 1965, and rates of fertility, confidence in government and national institutions, and trust in other people all began to fall. Mr. Fukuyama argues plausi-

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bly that the social changes in the real world such as growing numbers of women in the workforce began in the early Sixties to activate, so to speak, the liberationist philosophy that had been lying around, scattered and inert, in books, magazines, and lecture halls since the turn of the century. But the precise relationships of cause and effect are unknowable here and perhaps secondary. What seems undeniable is that the betrayal of liberalism is implicated in the social decay of the last thirty years.

A possible response to this state of affairs is to do nothing. That is neither so unreasonable nor so defeatist as may at first appear. Authorities as various as James Q. Wilson and Mr. Fukuyama (who draws heavily on the evidence of evolutionary psychology in support of his claim) agree that man is a creature with an innate drive for moral order as much as for political order. The social disorders of the last few decades make him acutely uncomfortable and he sets about establishing new rules of behavior, adopting new social practices that reflect and enforce them, and returning to old institutions and practices, albeit somewhat altered. This is an important point, though not entirely new. At the end of the Second World War, a young Viennese psychologist, Viktor Frankl (interestingly a cousin of Hayek's), emerged from a Nazi concentration camp with a new philosophy derived from seeing what it was that kept men going in the most extreme circumstances. Frankl concluded that man had an innate drive for meaning that could only be satisfied by a moral existence in particular, and, in descending order of importance, by God, love, and work. Hedonism ultimately makes one unhappy.

The relevance of these ideas here is that Marxism-cum-Millinery might go some way towards satisfying this metaphysical appetite in advance, or in the exciting early stages of its adoption when it promises to create a new and more ethical human being. But its dismal practical consequences will intensify the desire for authoritative moral guidance, necessarily of a different kind, though not necessarily of a very new kind. We see how this works in individual lives when the child of socially liberal parents, who has been indulged without limit, horrifies them either by joining a New Age sect with strong puritan rules or, worse, by returning to the religion of his ancestors in its sternest form. How this might work collectively in the larger society we are now beginning to see.

For, as Fukuyama points out, in the last few years the main indicators of social disorder have stopped rising and started to decline. Levels of crime peaked in the early 1990s; divorce stopped rising in the early 1980s; welfare rolls are falling, as is illegitimacy; and the statistics now show that people are more willing to trust social institutions and each other. Some of these changes can be attributed in part to the deliberate corrective policies of government such as higher rates of imprisonment and welfare reform designed to reduce dependency. But some—the fall in divorce rates for instance—seem to be spontaneous social movements reflecting the innate drive of most people for moral stability in an unsettling world.

Nor is even the new liberalism immune from this tendency although it naturally takes a distorted form. As Kenneth Minogue points out, liberalism undergoes three stages in dealing with human impulses. It first liberates a vice—sexual promiscuity, smoking, marital infidelity—from moral self-control on the grounds of increasing human happiness; it then takes alarm at the social consequences of its own reform in the shape of venereal diseases, deaths from cancer or AIDS, the social pathologies of children from broken homes; and, finally, it imposes bureaucratic regulation of the vice on the somewhat shifty grounds of public health and government spending. In recent years, there have been major campaigns against smoking and alcohol usage. The result is uncannily like Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, where criminals were commiserated with and the sick punished. Doctors, for instance, refuse to treat patients who smoke

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or, worse, forbid mental patients confined against their will from smoking because they are on hospital grounds; but the latest *Fortune* magazine reports that U.S. corporations now send executives to clinics for treatment of their "sex addiction."

If only to ensure that the "re-moralization" of society does not reflect such distortions, conservatives (many of whom, as Robert Conquest points out, are liberals outside the context of parochial politics) should remain involved in the moral and cultural debates. To be sure, the "catacombs" strategy has legitimate attractions for particular people. Why should parents choose an expensive miseducation for their children in the gender studies department of an Ivy League college when a small Christian college with a solid traditional grounding in American history and Engish literature is available? Or why should good scholars struggle to publish in unreadable "scholarly" publications for tenure addicts when they would get a much keener and more sophisticated response from people with similar interests on the internet? In both cases, they are amply justified in pursuing their interests. That said, the consequences of a general withdrawal of conservatives from cultural debates would weaken and distort those debates at the very time when they may be slowly turning in our direction. Many of the most influential books of the last two decades have, after all, been conservative ones such as *Losing Ground* and *The Closing of the American Mind*. This is no time for a general retreat into either a virtuous circle or a virtual circle.

In practice this means three things. The first is a continuation of the cultural and moral criticism that is plainly having an effect. In the aftermath of Littleton, but not solely because of Littleton, Hollywood is coming under general criticism for its irresponsible exploitation of violence and its general crudity. Similarly, opposition to the absurdities of postmodern theorizing in the academy is no longer confined to conservatives. Events like Alan Sokal's famous hoax, in which he persuaded the trendy quarterly *Social Text* to publish a tissue of nonsense purporting to demonstrate that scientific truth was merely a social construction, are now reaching the editorial pages, and they put the most extreme opponents of decency, common sense and true liberalism firmly on the defensive. We should grit our teeth, welcome these new allies, politely understand their wish to distance themselves from such rough beasts as ourselves, and commend their original insights to the media. At the same time, we should pioneer the next range of criticisms: is there any reason, for instance, that accrediting bodies that have thoroughly politicized themselves and their accreditations should continue to enjoy that considerable power? Or that the American Bar Association, which is now an ideological as much as a professional association, should continue to be seriously treated as a body that impartially assesses candidates for high legal office? There is no cause to think that our efforts are doomed to be disappointed—the decline in welfare rolls and the greater use of imprisonment that has clearly cut crime both stem in part from moral and cultural battles that conservatives waged, with apparent unsuccess, over many years.

Criticism on its own, however, would sound querulous. It might even hinder the second set of actions, namely, rebuilding a sense of American community. As Mr. Fukuyama points out, one of the most essential ingredients of recreating moral order and moral communities is a sense of trust. Too much "diversity" in a community makes trust harder to achieve in any event. But multiculturalism—the new liberalism's deconstruction of American national identity—might almost have been designed to maximize the tensions that are inevitable in a multi-ethnic society. The second suggestion is that conservatives revive against this false ideal the older notion of a common American culture based upon the English language and America's founding institutions and also drawing on the cultural influences of past and present immigrations in

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everything from slang to ethnic cuisines. How this traditional vision might be revamped and popularized in contemporary terms is outside the scope of this essay. But since Teddy Roosevelt rhetorically created it in the face of a similarly large immigration at the turn of the century and Hollywood updated it successfully in the 1930s, it is clearly not beyond the wit of either politicians or artists. And de-Balkanizing not only Americans but also the American imagination is probably essential to all other progress.

The third suggestion is that conservatives should make positive contributions to the rebuilding of America's moral community and cultural life across the board. The cultural climate itself is much less hostile than a few decades ago to work that does not present itself as avant garde. Many artists and composers are returning to what Roger Scruton, in his essay for this series (October 1998), praised as the inherited traditions of social knowledge in music and painting. American theater is at a lower ebb than its British cousin—where dramatists like Tom Stoppard and Alan Ayckbourn are demonstrating that brilliant inventions are still possible within the mainstream tradition—but in both countries the rediscovery of plays as different as *Wild Oats* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* has only hinted at the riches available. In popular music there is even a revival of Swing. And there are strong movements for the reform of the school curriculum along anti-progressive lines everywhere—in Britain, *mirabile dictu*, the campaign is being led by the head of the official schools inspectorate. In these circumstances, young conservative writers should perhaps direct their attention away from the over-crowded op-ed pages and towards off-off-Broadway, the television studios of beautiful downtown Burbank, and the editorial offices of educational publishers.

It is always impossible to predict what an individual example will achieve. Three very different examples, however, suggest that the effort is always worth making. The private voucher programs, instituted by the Bradley Foundation in Milwaukee and the financier Ted Forstmann nationally, have changed the debate on school choice, by dramatizing the desire of poor and minority parents to prize their children from the grip of bad teachers in bad public schools. At the University of Pennsylvania, Walter MacDougall has gained national attention with his shaping of a history curriculum that would reflect an American identity while giving other cultures and histories their proper regard. And with his off-Broadway satirical play about the postmodern theater, *Stonewall Jackson's House*, Jonathan Reynolds, (who is not a political conservative) found himself catapulted onto the op-ed pages by grateful reviewers for raising the curtain on the lunacies of theatrical correctness.

Such examples create ripples, and when there is a number of them, they make waves. It is then up to the rest of us to build on those examples by, among other things, directing private and public money to support them. When Cassie Bernall made her brave decision not to deny God at Littleton, she could never have guessed that she might become the patron saint of a teenage religious revival. But something like that may now be happening. And who knows if some village Fitzjames Stephen may not even now be shaping a philosophical language that will up-end John Stuart Mill and give conservative liberals the rhetorical advantage in public debate?

For there is a fourth consideration that is temperamental rather than programmatic. We must cherish something, namely patience, that our opponents disdain—and disdain for reasons which, while usually subconscious, are perfectly logical. Rome can be *burned* in a day; rebuilding it is a work that is never finished.

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A major minor: Ezra Pound's poetry

by Donald Lyons

The Pound that matters is early Pound, essentially the Pound of the London years. He arrived in London to stay (he had visited earlier) on August 14, 1908 and within a decade or so of that date had composed most of what is permanently valuable in his enormous oeuvre.

Pound had been a bright and prolific young poet before settling in London. He was born in Hailey, Idaho in 1885 and educated at Hamilton and Penn; Humphrey Carpenter, in his excellent biography, tells of how, back at Penn in 1906 to write a doctoral thesis on the *gracioso* in Spanish drama, Pound

> put his name down for classes in Provençal, Sicilian poetry, the *Chanson de Roland*, Boccaccio, Dante . . . and plays by Lope de Vega and his contemporaries . . . he abandoned it all almost at once, scarcely turning up for anything.

It's an anecdote prophetic both of Pound's slapdash ways with languages and of his almost total ignorance of drama.

The atmosphere in which Pound began writing poetry was informed by the Decadent and Pre-Raphaelite aestheticizing of writers like Rossetti, Swinburne, Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson, and early Yeats. Such writing went in for medievalizing and classicizing in attitude and subject matter; poetry was seen as the summoner of an imagined otherwhere, some place of passion, beauty and languorous loveliness totally unlike the ugly quotidian present. Not only is a great deal of Pound's apprentice work drenched in the diction and *Weltanschauung* of this late Romanticism, but his whole later career, indeed, may be seen as a struggle, successful only in part, to break away from it.

One poem from 1906, "La Fraisne" (meaning "The Ash Tree" and typically couched in a foreign tongue), has been correctly dubbed, by Thomas F. Grieve, "a Poundian exercise in medievalism borrowed from the nineteenth century." "La Fraisne" manipulates the tale of a troubadour who "runs mad in a forest for unrequited love and chooses a tree for his bride." The poem shows Pound adopting the rhetorics of his two major influences: Yeats and Browning. (Pound was himself, of course, to influence Yeats in the direction of more natural speech rhythms.) Early in the poem the situation is put thus:

> By the still pool of Mar-nan-otha
> Have I found me a bride
> That was a dog-wood tree some syne.
> She hath called me from mine old ways

Later the voice changes and the situation is differently articulated:

> Once there was a woman . . .
> . . . but I forget . . . she was . .
> . . . I hope she will not come again.

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. . . I do not remember . . . . .

. . . I think she hurt me once, but . .
That was very long ago. [ellipses in original]

Here we get Pound's Browning, the master of the dramatic monologue, but Browning's tortured pentameter has been "fractured" (Carpenter) into iambic tetrameters where aposiopesis mimics self-pity and distraction. Pound seems to need masks to express anything but rancor, and the Browning mask was to prove very adhesive.

Another early poem that, like "La Fraisne," manages partially to escape from the shackles of poetical diction is "Cino," dating from 1907, subtitled "Italian campagna, 1309, the open road" and written in the voice of a troubadour.

Bah! I have sung women in three cities,
But it is all the same
And I will sing of the sun,

Lips, words, and you snare them,
Dreams, words and they are as jewels,
Strange spells of old deity.

The opening ejaculation is Browningesque macho. The weary languor of the first three roughly iambic lines gives way to one of the first of the poet's paradisal incantations in Greek lyric meters grouping syllables around a central choriamb, that is, the four-syllable foot – ◡ ◡ –. Later on, Cino breaks into a sun song that begins, "'Pollo Phoibee, old tin pan, you." This slangy truculence, at once Cino's and Pound's, is ominous here, for it was to become one of the writer's favorite voices. Two other troubadour monologues, "Na Audiart" (1907) and "Sestina: Altaforte" (1908), remain largely moored in archaizing diction (the former) or Browningesque bluster (the latter).

By February 1910, Pound had completed a prose study of the troubadours, *The Spirit of Romance*. By February 1912, he had a new collection ready, *Ripostes*, which he dedicated to his schoolfellow William Carlos Williams. Carpenter finds it exudes "still a strong flavor of the Pre-Raphaelites and the 1890s," but there are other notes sounded as well. To be sure, there is much overstuffed bric-a-brac on the order of "The Tomb at Akr Caar" ("I am thy soul Nikoptis") and "Apparuit" ("Golden rose the house, in the portal I saw/ thee"). The archaizing is bent to a purpose, though, in the rendition of "The Seafarer." It mingles with urban flavors in "Portrait d'une femme":

Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea,
London has swept about you this score years,
And bright ships left you this or that in fee,
Ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things.

Also in "N.Y.":

Now do I know that I am mad,
For here are a million people surly with traffic;
This is no maid.

While rhythmically arresting, "Portrait"'s attitudes are simple; it has been well, if unkindly, described as an unconscious picture of Pound's own jumbled mind and sensibility. The poem is far slighter than the roughly contemporaneous "Portrait of a Lady" by Eliot, who was, like his friend and mentor, alluding to James. The metrical achievements of *Ripostes* are "A Girl" and "The Return," both of which are discussed by D. S. Carne-Ross in "New Masks for Old: A Note on Poundian Metrics," by far the most valuable introduction to the subject. "A Girl" begins: "The tree has entered my hands,/ The sap has ascended my arms." The lines, which can be scanned ◡ – – – ◡ ◡ – and ◡ – – ◡ – ◡ ◡ –, are free variants on Greek Alcaic meter; for Pound, as had often been said, the line-length was the verse unit; these line-lengths sounded a note new and sweet. "The Return," as Carne-Ross shows, adopts a dactylo-epitrite scheme – ◡ ◡ – ◡ ◡ – in lines like:

Gods of the wingèd shoe!
With them the silver hounds,
sniffing the trace of air!

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The formalist brio of these two poems is expended in the service of classicizing tropes—an Ovidian metamorphosis and a cletic invocation of the Furies. Search not for allusions, we are advised by Hugh Kenner, but the poetry has tones, if not specific referents. These are not language-poems, although Marjorie Perloff stresses the nonsense-formalist side of Pound, but are rather exercises in decorative paganism, Tennysonian melodies orchestrated for modernism. Classicizing, too, is the famous 1912 "In a Station of the Metro," a poem Kenner admits evokes "a crowd seen underground, as Odysseus and Orpheus and Kore saw crowds in Hades."

Pound's next collection, *Lustra* (1913), contains many exiguous lyrics like "Metro" and "Alba" and "Art 1910," but its keynote is a sarcastic epigrammatism. Pound tries for a concision out of Martial or the Greek Anthology in squibs like "The Garden":

> Like a skein of loose silk blown against a wall
> She walks by the railing of a path in
> Kensington Gardens,
> And she is dying piece-meal
> of a sort of emotional anemia.

The Decadent pictorialism collapses into the bathos of a diagnosis; neither is rhythmically alive. Pound's repertory of easy contempt rarely rises into wit (with the exception of "The Bath Tub"). The 1913 *Lustra* has two works of power: "The Coming of War: Actaeon" is a fuzzily archaizing divine invocation, and "Provincia Deserta" is a spare, lovely evocation of a walking trip through Provence. While praising the paratactic vigor of "Provincia Deserta" ("There is a place of trees . . . gray with lichen./ I have walked there/ thinking of old days."), Kenner sees the diction as courting a kind of Hemingwayesque, self-parodying mannerism. In *Lustra*, too, occur Pound's first verses in the orientalizing manner, a manner that was to become one of his major masks.

Before moving on to Pound's key achievements in *Cathay* and *Propertius*, I suppose I'd better explain that the absence of the sanctified taxonomy of Poundian verse—symbolism, imagism, vorticism, logopoeia, melopoeia, Ideogrammic Method, phanopoeia, *et hoc genus omne*—here is motivated by a conviction that these counters were always at best uselessly vague and volatile, at worst obfuscatory. Solemn attempts to chart or to evaluate his work by their lights are sterile.

During or after the First World War, Pound composed what have, with some plausibility, been called war books: *Cathay* in April 1915 (later to be augmented by four poems); *Homage to Sextus Propertius* in 1917, and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* in 1920. In all three, Pound, now feeling his way toward what he wanted to be major verse, flaunted masks or personae (the title, confusingly, of two of his volumes). In *Cathay*, Pound sounded for the first and last time in his oeuvre the notes of warmth and humanity; in *Propertius* he sounded, equally uniquely, notes of humor and sexuality. The fourteen poems in the first *Cathay* represent Pound's workings-up from transliterations in the notebooks of the sinologist Ernest Fenollosa; what Fenollosa transliterated were, mainly, poems by the eighth-century Tang poet Li Po, whom he, using a Japanese form, called Rihaku. They are of course to be judged as English poems, not as trots. Kenner puts the case for *Cathay* as a war poem: "Its exiled bowmen, deserted women, levelled dynasties, departures from far places . . . were selected from the diverse wealth in the notebooks by a sensibility responsive to torn Belgium and disrupted London." Carpenter, remarking on "how very little of [Pound's] own voice is recognizable in *Cathay*," yet calls "the success of *Cathay* . . . an achievement of diction." Precisely: the less of Pound *in propria persona*, the greater the artistic success.

Pound's diction—he writes with laconic sobriety and decorum self-contained free-verse lines informed by Greek patterns—is here miraculously supple and delicate. In lines like "When we set out, the willows were drooping with spring,/ We come back

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in the snow," we see technique at the service of something significant. In "Exile's Letter," Pound found a language purged of the Decadent poeticality of chinoiserie, a modernist bareness:

> And if you ask how I regret that parting:
> It is like the flowers falling at Spring's end
> Confused, whirled in a tangle.
> What is the use of talking, and there is no end of talking,
> There is no end to things in the heart.

There is a relaxed humanity in lines like

> Rain, rain, and the clouds have gathered,
> The eight ply of the heavens are darkness,
> The flat land is turned into river.
> "Wine, wine, here is wine!"

Remarkable is *Cathay*'s tenderness towards women characters and speakers, as in "The Beautiful Toilet" ("Blue, blue is the grass about the river") and "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter" ("At fourteen I married My Lord you./ I never laughed, being bashful"). "The most appealing poem of Ezra's whole career," says Carpenter about this piece. To write it, however, Pound needed the mediation of Fenollosa and of Li Po and of Chinese, in which he soon declared himself an expert, although his wife let slip the fact that he "never quite" learned how to look up radicals in the dictionary—*the* necessary skill for doing Chinese. He was soon, predictably, elaborating a theory of the Ideogrammic Method based on Chinese.

Pound's knowledge of a foreign tongue became a big red herring in the reception of his next large work, *Homage to Sextus Propertius*. Its twelve poems, stitched together from separate passages of the Augustan love elegist, contain many "poker-faced misreadings" (Kenner's phrase) planted to infuriate dons. Pound knew what he was doing, for the results are almost always bilingually funny. In long, loping lines full of the sort of place names and proper names Pound adored stuffing into his verses, he echoes and transmutes the Roman poet's contempt for high politics and obsession with his girlfriend. "Poem III" ("Midnight, and a letter comes to me from our mistress") finds the poet on the Via Sciro at night, hoping that "The moon will carry his candle,/ The stars will point out the stumbles." The familiar Greekoid rhythms are here inflected with a self-deprecating humor. The timorously polysyllabic accents of a cowed male are amusingly caught in VII ("Me happy, night, night full of brightness;/ Oh couch made happy by my long delectations") and in X ("Light, light of my eyes, at an exceeding late hour I was wandering,/ And intoxicated,/ . . . There were upon the bed no signs of a voluptuous encounter,/ No signs of a second incumbent"). Uncaught by commentators, "Homage" rises to a sly lewdness: "Bright tips reach up from twin towers,/ Anienan spring water falls into flat-spread pools." *Propertius* is an (anti-) war poem in explicitly rejecting public poetry ("And I will also sing war songs when this matter of a girl is exhausted") and epic poetry ("And if she plays with me with her shirt off,/ We shall construct many Iliads"). Influenced by the Eliot of *Prufrock* and by Jules Laforgue's deflating ironies, *Homage* insists on a separate erotic peace. Ironically, Pound abjured epic with more aplomb and finesse than he later embraced it.

The war done, Pound, making ready to leave England, attempted a summing up of his years there in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" in 1920. He called it "a farewell to London" and a parallel to *Homage* in its vision of an "empire [here, the British] declining into the shit pile." In quatrains that are modelled after Gautier's (Eliot was experimenting on similar lines as part of a joint project), Pound tinkers with the persona of a failed aesthete—"a dilettante version of certain aspects of Ezra," Carpenter ventures. After reading chapters of *Ulysses* (Joyce was a dangerous stimulus to Pound), the poet conflates, in poem I, Mauberley with the Greek wanderer: "His true Penelope was Flaubert/ He fished by obstinate

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isles." In poem III, modern vulgarity is simplistically set off against ancient beauty—the sort of thing Eliot is wrongly accused of doing in *The Waste Land* and elsewhere: "The piano 'replaces'/ Sappho's barbitos."

What first strikes the hearer here is the total unsingingness of these lines as the Gautier smoothness is mechanically undercut by flat prosaicisms. Leavis, who found *Mauberley* to be Pound's masterpiece, speaks of the verse as "extraordinarily subtle"; Kenner, otherwise differently affected toward Pound, also praises the poem as a "technical marvel." I see rather an absence of rhythmic enactment and the growing presence of a bullying rhetoric. Already in poem III "we choose a knave or an eunuch/ To rule over us," modern democracy being inferior to ancient tyranny; by IV and V soldiers are dying "For an old bitch gone in the teeth,/ For a botched civilization,// Charm, smiling at the good mouth/ Quick eyes gone under earth's lid." The easy generalizations of the first two lines are only partially redeemed by the rhythmic life of the last two.

There ensues a rhymed catalogue of aesthetes and other mediocrities named (Swinburne, Burne-Jones) and disguised (Beerbohm anti-Semitically slurred, Arnold Bennett undervalued as always). A parade of analysis is proffered in a later poem about aestheticism:

> And his desire for survival,
> Faint in the most strenuous moods,
> Became an Olympian *apathein*
> In the presence of selected perceptions.

In contrast to the witty withdrawals of *Propertius*, *Mauberley* withdraws into "ambrosia": "He made no immediate application/ Of this to the relation of the state/ To the individual." This is unconvincing as language and as thought. Pound is exaggerating the aesthete's refined self-distancing from life because he has no notion of what to put in place of aestheticism, although, considering what he did eventually find to supplement aestheticism, perhaps we should count our blessings. *Mauberley* is not a confession; it is a game. Bereft of a powerful persona not himself and incapable of genuine introspection, the poet natters on, elaborating a fantastic case against an improbable "hedonist." Donald Davie is right to call *Mauberley* "thin" and "attitudinizing."

As early as 1915, Pound had composed three ur-Cantos, published in *Poetry* in the summer of 1917. Called *Three Cantos I-III*, they were designed as the start of a "chryselephantine poem of immeasurable length," an "endless poem of no known category," as the author variously referred to it. The asymptotic amorphousness of the plan is telling. Would Dante have spoken thus of his project? It seems indeed odd that "this painfully limited mind, which does not know what a civilization is, and can suppose that to appreciate the best poems in a language you need only know as much of the language as the poems contain," in Leavis's words, should set out to create a modern epic. Envy, perhaps, of Joyce, who really did the thing.

Three Cantos I engages in an argument with Browning over the contents, the ingredients, the permissible mix of fact and fiction in both Browning's "Sordello" (a long narrative about an obscure troubadour) and in the verse at hand. It's revealing that Pound concentrated on the hermetic broodings of "Sordello" rather than, say, Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, one of the great poems of the nineteenth century and one that involves interpersonal drama. Was there ever a less dramatic, a more solipsistic talent than Pound's? "What's left for me to do?" wonders the poet. He decides to concoct one of his pagan theophanies: "God floats in the azure air,/ Bright gods, and Tuscan, back before dew was shed." Aware of possible criticism of this aestheticism, he immediately asks, "Is it a world like Puvis'?" and answers, not altogether convincingly, "Never so pale, my friend." Botticelli, Shakespeare, Picasso, and Wyndham Lewis get mentioned. (In the interesting

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1915 poem "Near Perigord," Pound had argued with himself and with Arnaut Daniel over the propriety of putting fiction and imagined material into a historical poem. Into his own later Cantos Pound would dump documents wholesale.) *Three Cantos III* ends with a passage from the *Odyssey* about the underworld (meant to be a Dantesque gesture in pagan robes), followed by some cryptic data about the Latin translation of Homer Pound bought in Paris.

By the time the first Cantos were published in final form in *A Draft of XVI Cantos* in 1925, much had been changed, compressed, reshuffled, abbreviated. Ronald Bush, a meticulous and sensitive tracer of Poundian revisings, remarks on the "elliptical . . . increased obscurity" of the revisions. "The unfortunate effect . . . was to obscure Canto IV forever," he sighs. Canto I is the Homer, further cropped and lopped. Canto II, written later in 1922, is, centrally, a funny and magical rendering of the Ovidian metamorphosis of the kidnapped Dionysus's ship into a panther-stalked vineyard ("Beasts like shadows in glass/ A furred tail upon nothingness"). The verse, close to Greek glyconics, is alive and lithe. Canto III reprises the sexy sylvan and marine theophanies from the *Three Cantos I*. Canto IV, begun in 1919, deploys an even less discursive, more cubistically fragmented collage, "ply over ply" in the poet's words. It offers quick cuts from violence in classic and medieval stories to serene eastern stories; the central anecdote, vividly told in ripe Pound, recounts the Ovidian metamorphosis of Actaeon into a stag. Canto V alludes to violence in the Medici and Borgia families; Canto VI to violence in the family of Eleanor of Aquitaine; Canto VII jumbles all the above. These cantos do not resemble, suggests Carpenter, "a classical text which will finally reward patient unravelling. Rather, the reader encounters an imagination that has not left sufficient clues as to its activities." That's one way of putting it; another would be to say that Pound's obscurantist technique results not from the felt complexity of modern life and language, as do those of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, but from a will to lord it over and baffle the reader.

Bush speculates that both these cantos and Eliot's "Gerontion" were reactions to Joyce's "Proteus" chapter, with its talk of the "ineluctable modality of the visible." "Pound, however," Bush says, "does not [unlike Eliot] recognize any action as evil; because he does not believe in a Christian soul." True about Pound, no doubt, but Bush's implied syllogism is rather shaky. "The only evil he [Pound] understands is a deprivation of good, and he defines good as a perception of the beautiful." This is well and definitively said, and constitutes a sort of propaedeutic preparation for the abysses into which the *Cantos*'s aestheticism, unsupported by an adult moral sense, falls.

By the time Pound wrote Canto VIII, in 1922, he had *The Waste Land* to react to and he did. He began the canto with a messily aggressive dig at Eliot:

> These fragments you have shelved (shored).
> "Slut!" "Bitch!" Truth and Calliope
> Slinging each other sous les lauriers:
> *That* Alessandro was negroid. And Malatesta
> Sigismund.

He had something else, too: a hero and counterfoil to English decadence in the Renaissance desperado Malatesta, a hero he totally endorsed and an avatar of Mussolini, Pound's new idol (some very unsavory anecdotes about Pound rooting in the early 1920s in Fascist-controlled libraries, as told in Lawrence Rainey's *Institutions of Modernism*, settle this point). He soon decamped to the land of the Duce. Even back in England, the *Cantos* never had been, as an epic, anything more than absurd—a scattershot Paradise fitfully evoked by apparitions of Greek godlets. In Italy, Pound made more and more room for his hates and crackpot theories. His tantrums, infantile in their scatology and name-calling, are interrupted by snippets of (misunderstood) documents from Renaissance Italy and our Founding Fathers; snippets of personal

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reminiscence intersect pastel tableaux from ancient mythology and Chinese history. Elaborating an anti-Christian mythos is a neutral poetic ambition. Stevens tried it, so did Shelley. They worked at it, though, and took thought. Pound never got beyond dusting off statues.

Pound was a dedicated hater, a fanatical anti-Semite whose every utterance came, at least as early as the 1920s, to be colored by what Christopher Caldwell, in a devastating review of Pound's disgusting letters to Olivia Rossetti Agresti (the niece of Dante Gabriel and Christina), calls *tout court* his Nazism. Caldwell is right; Pound's central, focal hatred was directed at Jews and he never repented it. Attempts by acolytes to fudge, diffuse or ignore his monomania are shameful. For all his mumbo-jumbo about Fascism and Douglas economics, he was in essence a Nazi. Or rather, he became one, although warning signs of a certain human deracination are there in the compulsive mask-grabbing of the early verse.

It is, however, indiscriminate to aver, as Caldwell does, that "the mental patient Ezra Pound and the raving anti-Semite *are* the poet Ezra Pound." Much more judicious and sensible was Leavis who said, in reviewing some Pound letters in 1951, that "the spectacle of Pound's degeneration is a terrible one and no one ought to pretend that it is anything but what it is." "Degeneration" implies a process; characters, even very strong ones like Pound's, change for better or worse. Caldwell's blanket denunciation, moreover, sits oddly with his formulaic homage—"Twentieth-century poetry offers nothing more metrically dazzling than this, and little more moving"—to the rhythmically inert and morally null *Pisan Cantos* (written in 1945 during Pound's internment by the U.S. Army).

As a figure in the early history of modernism, Pound is central, inspiring, intriguing. He edited *The Waste Land*; he serialized some chapters of *Ulysses*: and responded generously to much of it—calling "Circe" Joyce's Hell chapter, "a new Inferno in full sail . . . megaloscrumptious-mastondonic." As a modernist poet, he accomplished some amazingly original work in his English decade—above all, in my judgment, in the more or less achieved wholes of *Cathay* and *Propertius*. But even his best verse does not have major weight. Next to Eliot and Stevens and Frost, next to even his friend Williams, he is a minor poet, a major minor but a minor. He will always appeal to cultists and decipherers seduced by the allure of a master cryptographer; in this sense, he resembles George Chapman or William Blake. As a versifier, he has inspired some verse wiser and sweeter (I do not say better) than his own, for example, "Black Zodiac" by Charles Wright.

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Dawn Powell: the fruits of revival

by Lauren Weiner

Dawn Powell (1896–1965) wrote novels about the artist's struggle for recognition. Her own struggle for it and the recent recovery of her work make a poignant story. I have heretofore been reluctant to accept the idea that a full-fledged Powell revival is in progress. By now, though, the evidence has piled up. Her books have continued to be reissued throughout this decade, and her name now pops up in literary reviews when the subject is undeservedly forgotten writers making a comeback. Then, too, the indefatigable Tim Page has built up a head of steam in his noble crusade to bring Dawn Powell to the attention of the reading public.

As Page points out in *Dawn Powell: A Biography*, the Ohio-born Powell is a resolutely autobiographical writer.[1] Nearly all of her fifteen novels have to do with the sensitive Midwesterner's yearning—sometimes fulfilled, sometimes not—for a wider world of culture. She came to New York City to seek her fortune in 1918, married, had a child, and lived in Greenwich Village for the rest of her days. Yet her view of New York was perpetually that of a newcomer because she played and replayed in her imagination the arrival in the big city of the scruffy but hopeful provincial.

From 1925 onward, Powell diligently published stories, novels, and plays, and by 1942 her editor was Max Perkins of Charles Scribner's Sons, she was contributing fiction to *The New Yorker*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Collier's*, and movie producers pestered her to come to Hollywood to work on screenplays. She counted as friends people like John Dos Passos, Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, Ernest Hemingway, and John Howard Lawson (the latter Page believes to have been her paramour in the 1930s).

Yet at the height of her career, what preoccupied this self-made woman was not her glamorous present but her humble past. A childhood spent being shunted from relative to relative in the villages and factory towns near Mount Gilead, Ohio, haunted her so much that she wrote the novel *My Home Is Far Away* (1944), which Tim Page calls "painfully close to unvarnished autobiography" and "a wrenching mixture of the sorrow, apprehension, and insistent self-affirmation the young Dawn Powell must have felt after her own escape."

The list of novels divides into two categories: before and after "escape." The first six books were about yearners who never make it out of Ohio. From 1934 onward—with the exception of the deeply retrospective *My Home Is Far Away*—Manhattan became the setting for clever and funny satires that mark Powell as a writer of real distinction. The latest reissues, one from each category, are just out from Steerforth Press and, as with earlier ones, I find the "after" novel much more successful than the "be-

1 *Dawn Powell: A Biography*, by Tim Page; Henry Holt & Company, 352 pages, $30.

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fore." Neither, though, bears comparison with *A Time to Be Born* (1942) or *The Locusts Have No King* (1948), two New York novels that deserve to be on a short list of the best comic novels in American literature.

The Bride's House (1929) was Powell's third book.[2] A romance novel of the intelligent sort (Page employs the term "bodice-ripper"), it has several bright spots but is weak overall. The bride of the title is the dark-haired beauty Sophie Truelove, whose tortured initiations into love, sex, marriage, and adultery form the main plot. It is hard to take Sophie seriously. What I do take seriously is Powell's intention to make us understand the clash between a proper young virgin's idealization of love and marriage, and "this throbbing in her loins," Sophie's response to someone other than the blond, blue-eyed paragon she is engaged to marry. The good girl/bad girl theme is done clumsily here. Powell would master it in successive works, bringing to bear on it a combination of subtle observation, raucous humor, and astuteness about social class.

The would-be artist in *The Bride's House* is Mary Cecily, Sophie's sad older sister. Mary Cecily's pining to express herself musically is presented as an instance of the wild and romantic streak in certain members of the Truelove clan, which streak is also held responsible for Sophie's falling into an illicit affair with a local Casanova with "dark brooding eyes." Much better than any of the Truelove turbulence are the book's evocations of rural life at the turn of the last century. A stuffy parlor here, a train depot there, a church congregation lifting its voice in song—all testify to how fully Powell appreciated the very place from which she felt driven to escape.

Some figures are rendered with the characteristic Powell vivacity. These include three urchins who stay at the Truelove farm as a respite from their irresponsible mother (the clever, sassy, and misunderstood middle sister, Vera, is clearly a juvenile version of the author herself). Then there is Anna Stacey, schoolmarm of Ashton Center. Prickly and mean in and out of the classroom, Anna presents a challenge to George Truelove, Sophie and Mary Cecily's brother. Stolid George is not the beau Anna wanted. His flat-footedness provokes her beyond endurance but her scorn only stiffens his resolve to make her his wife. It is a dynamic that elicits from us laughter tinged with discomfort, as Powell hints at a physically violent undercurrent in the life of the newlyweds. There is something arrestingly real in this: the woman accedes not only because she wishes to be rescued from life as an old maid but also because the sexual tension between her and her rescuer is genuine. Powell has botched her presentation of the confusion in the heart (and loins) of her protagonist Sophie, yet her minor characters successfully bring out the odder features of nature's dance of approach and response.

And, delightfully, these characters turn Laura Ingalls Wilder's fiction on its head. With her ectomorphic schoolmarm, Powell impishly raises the possibility that the country "blab schools" that so shaped the national character were run by people who absolutely detested children and their jobs:

> She would scream if she had to endure those high quavering voices day in and day out for another year. She took a piece of chalk and wrote savagely on the blackboard the day's lesson. Slate pencils scratched.
>
> "You spelled believe wrong," said Vera Winton.
>
> Miss Stacey rubbed out the word, heard the tittering behind her, hated them all. . . . The wretched day dragged along. Spelling, reading, numbers, scrambling for lunch baskets, writing, singing. . . . The air was jabbed with reprimands and parabolas of tittering. The big Tompkins boy was impudent and was told to stay after school, but at four Anna Stacey saw him sneaking off before the others and she made no sign. . . . She hated tomorrow. "You spelled believe wrong," that child had said.

2 *The Bride's House*, by Dawn Powell; Steerforth Press, 187 pages, $14.

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All Powell novels are studded with gems like that. The pity is that their central situations and characters frequently are not as well realized. Tim Page, a (mostly) even-handed judge of Powell's work, admits that "much of her best writing always went into inspired digressions from her plots."

It is also true of *The Happy Island* (1938), which was intended as an updated version of Petronius's ribald classical romp *Satyricon*, with a bunch of Manhattan show-business, media, and literary types as the modern satirical targets.[3] The central character, a self-absorbed nightclub sensation named Prudence Bly, is less than engaging, but our entry into her world affords us amusement, and even insight into commerce and culture in America. The full range of Powell's interests is visible here, in contrast to the somewhat constricting Ohio novels.

Powell's diaries (collected and edited by Page in 1995) contain several entries on *The Happy Island*. In one of them, the author says she meant to paint "a picture of people ordinarily envied as Glamorous Idlers and showing up—not their immorality, which is always fun—but the niggling, bickering meanness of their life." Write in a "swift fierce style," she urged herself, but this book feels more rushed and haphazard than swift. As to fierceness, this is one of those cases where the sarcasm eventually pushes the reader away. It has not been properly balanced by the light, madcap quality that Edmund Wilson, in an essay on Powell, described as a "fairyland strain of Welsh fantasy." Both the lighter and the darker shadings are integral to Powell's concept of satire. She wanted to show people stepping lively in the dance of life—"their immorality, which is always fun"—while also showing that life stinks—due to "the niggling, bickering meanness" with which human beings too often treat one another. It cannot have been a simple thing to meld these shadings into a credible and compelling whole; just because Powell did not manage the trick in *The Happy Island* is no reason to pass over a novel that is memorable despite its manifold defects.

Several of the satyrs in this Satyricon are homosexuals. Elsewhere in Powell, homosexual characters tend to be repellent; here she takes a more sympathetic approach, attempting to portray the inner life of the gay men of the Greenwich Village arts crowd. The result is highly entertaining, though she does not manage to differentiate the personalities of James Pinckney and D. O. Lloyd sufficiently. Their biographical details vary but each is wistful, generous, a bit misunderstood, and above all deeply cultured. Pinckney ends up "finding himself" and garnering admiration by signing up to go to Spain to fight the Fascists, while Lloyd, a mandarin of the New York theatrical world, dies suddenly during one of his own legendary cocktail parties, his passing hardly mourned at all by his so-called friends, the members of his social and artistic set who benefitted from his generosity over the years.

The funniest scenes in the book concern the loutish young man whom Pinckney has stolen from Lloyd. Bert Willy is a secondary character we never "get inside of" but his brief appearances show that Powell knows him through and through. At one point Bert runs afoul of a Philadelphia society lady who, to assure herself that James Pinckney has permitted at his dinner table only people of quality, quizzes Bert about his family and where they "were from *originally*":

> Bert said nothing. The vital question hung on the air while James blanched, and Evalyn watched Bert's calm carving of the wishbone he had given himself. He would not look up for James's warning eye.
>
> "Virginia?" suggested Evalyn. "Massachusetts? There's a Williams in Baltimore, of course. There's Williams College, too."
>
> "Willy," said Bert and filled his mouth grossly.

3 *The Happy Island*, by Dawn Powell; Steerforth Press, 270 pages, $14.

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> "Bert," said James with ominous patience. "Evalyn asks where your family were settled before the Middle West period."
>
> Bert gave in grudgingly, swallowed his food.
>
> "Garden of Eden," he said and went into a fit of convulsive mirth that sent him choking and spitting into the kitchen amazingly unharmed by the poison rays from his two companions.

This man's faults (selfishness, ignorance) and his virtues (an American unwillingness to be cowed by social superiors) are crystal clear.

The same goes for Eugene Brent, a native New Yorker and advertising man who gets dragged into the orbit of the artistic and social elite by his wife. An ordinary Joe, he does not worship fame like the *cognoscenti* do. He hasn't much culture but, importantly, he's not immune to it: "Brent *was* interested in the theater, but his interest took the banal, unprofessional form of discussions of plays and acting instead of box office or chic little amusing tattle on advance sales, angels, and managerial losses." Eugene Brent is proof that Powell cared not only about aspiring artists but about the audience those artists would reach if they were talented enough. This fellow's innocence, moreover, points up our own loss of innocence. The public today steeps itself in box office and ratings data and the "amusing tattle" of entertainment industry insiders—and who would argue that movies, books, television, and particularly the American theater are the better for it?

In comparison with these ancillary figures, Prudence Bly does not make much of an impression. She is struggling to understand herself, and her confusion, like Sophie Truelove's, renders her vague. It would not be until the charming Ebie Vane in *Angels on Toast* (1940), the next novel, that Powell would figure out how to present an emancipated New York woman who is both profoundly ambivalent about love, marriage, and career, and distinct as a personality. We do understand that Prudence Bly's harsh childhood in Silver City, Ohio "conditioned her to a lack of faith in humanity and provided her with a rather wry philosophy." Whenever Powell's people evince philosophies—even ones reflecting her own view, as that phrase does—you know a challenge is coming. Prudence, with her acquired sophistication and her surpluses of money, celebrity, chic outfits, and sexual partners, is in need of lessons about human decency that an honest Midwesterner could teach her.

Enter Jeff Abbott, an old flame from back home, who prompts in her a longing to reattach herself to her roots. As a novelistic creation, Abbott is no more satisfactory than Prudence, but he tells us something noteworthy about a phase of Dawn Powell's writing career. I had taken Edmund Wilson's word for it that she did not get caught up in the left-wing politics of the 1930s. The diaries and the biography belie Wilson. Tim Page makes a convincing case that the not-very-happily-married Powell was involved for a time with the playwright and screen writer John Howard Lawson (later a member of the Hollywood Ten) and that, while her Midwestern common sense stopped her from ever swallowing the Communist program in toto, she at one time gave Lawson's political and aesthetic theories a sympathetic hearing. Those theories were integral to Powell's *Story of a Country Boy* (1934); they also make their way into *The Happy Island*, mostly through young Abbott, the author of searing proletarian plays.

Abbott has left Silver City unaware that his former sweetheart has preceded him to New York. His plan is to take the theatrical world by storm and fulfill his destiny as a kind of Buckeye Clifford Odets. He intends to prove that success can be attained without truckling—without losing, that is, an ounce of the stout yeoman virtues or revolutionary élan that the slogan "Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism" typified for Lawson and others like him between the World Wars. Jeff (short for "Jefferson," we are told) finds a garret to write in, and surrounds himself with salt-of-the-earth ethics. He's come to knock

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some sense into the decadent Eastern establishment. He's sincere. Wants to show 'em what America's really all about. Talks in short masculine bursts.

The man is a cartoon, utterly devoid of depth or persuasiveness. That Powell can't bring him to life very possibly stems from the fact that Communism isn't (wasn't) twentieth-century Americanism. Radicals of the time pretended that two unrelated antidotes to the corruptions of modern capitalism—Jeffersonian wholesomeness and Marxist dialectics—went together like peanut butter and jelly. Whether Powell truly bought that line I cannot say, but certain it is that she tried to make it get up and walk around in the person of Jefferson Abbott. Several plain folks in the novel (Bert Willy, Eugene Brent, and others) puncture the superficiality and snobbery of Manhattan's *beau monde*, but it is the playwright's opinions that count with our heroine. Prudence absorbs Abbott's indictment of urbanity and bourgeois comfort, and this puts—or at least it seems to put—the stamp of authorial approval on his Red-tinted populism. Whether this approval is withdrawn, or qualified, or even affected at all by Prudence's eventual break-up with Abbott is likewise unclear.

She ends up spurning the he-man Marxist when, having set up house with him back in Ohio, she is crushed by his male chauvinism. (Apparently Abbott missed class on the day that Marx's eradication of the sexual division of labor was covered.) The playwright reveals to Prudence the paltriness of her life in New York City but he is eventually shown up as a dour ideologue and domestic tyrant. Are Communist ideas thus rejected? Small-town life? Both? If there is a conceptual muddle here, one is tempted to blame a healthy incapacity on Powell's part to stay under the spell of the Lawson point of view for the length of an entire novel.

The last chapter finds Prudence back in Manhattan about to take up her old life, her faith in its desirability shaken and her singing career in severe trouble. Nothing wrong with bringing a work of fiction to a bleak or an open-ended close (Henry James did it all the time). The close of this intelligent and lively book, though, seems positively slapdash—it kicks the protagonist down a flight of stairs, novelistically speaking. The last word is unaccountably given to a pretty boy radio personality whom Prudence once thought she loved. He registers—for the reader, not within Prudence's hearing—that she has lost her looks.

At her best Dawn Powell is the genuine article, a wit. At less than her best, wit declines into mere deprecation. One of her satirical models was Flaubert, and I dare say that his hard brilliance may not have been a good artistic influence. Though Powell's biographer is at pains to prove that the critics of her time found not just wit, but warmth, too, in her fiction, he nonetheless acknowledges the slide in quality whenever harshness gains the upper hand. *The Happy Island*, writes Page, is "suffused with a curious satiety, as if Powell's amusement at human foibles had turned into annoyance."

This sensitive study by Page, a Pulitzer Prize-winning music critic, distills from Dawn Powell's papers, diaries, and published writings, and from interviews with surviving relatives, acquaintances, and her literary executor, the sense that the author had a hard and chaotic life. The people most important to her disappointed her, starting with her mother, who died when she was an infant, and her travelling salesman father, who picked as a replacement a cruel woman completely indifferent to the feelings of Powell and her two sisters. Powell and her once-dashing but progressively alcoholic husband, an advertising executive named Joseph Gousha, disappointed one another in some unspecified way (he is hardly mentioned in her diaries). Each apparently had involvements outside of the marriage but they managed to stay together. Page handles judiciously Powell's drinking habits and her Prudence Bly-like "generous attitude toward sex," as he puts it, neither shying away from the personal details nor wallowing in them.

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One marvels at Powell's productiveness amid the bohemian disorder of the Gousha family life. She fought untoward circumstances with valor. She was the first to acknowledge how scarred she was by her rough beginnings, and how depressed it made her to see other, less talented writers gaining greater stature than she had, but the bitterness seems never to have penetrated to the solid kernel within.

The Goushas' son, Joseph Gousha, Jr., was born autistic, and caring for him was a burden made all the heavier by the couple's profligacy. One of the most unexpected and touching aspects of Page's book is what he has done in describing Joseph, Jr., an honest soul and a misfit who loved his parents and was loved by them. From this account it would seem that Powell succeeded, despite the tumult of her personal affairs, in being a better parent than the parents she had. She was determined to nurture her son's rather impressive interests and talents, and to obtain the best institutional care for him, but because of the family's penuriousness he ended up a ward of the state. Powell's death, as narrated by Page, is wrenchingly sad not least because of the bewilderment in which it left Joseph Gousha, Jr.

Several misimpressions that I had about the novelist have been corrected. Page rounds out the received picture of Powell by, among other things, capturing her ambivalence toward her origins and the ways in which she stayed an Ohioan no matter how much polish she acquired. (Her special knack for a kind of storytelling that was sophisticated without being the least bit fancy must have been the reason she appealed to British readers so much.) Page rightly emphasizes how total was Powell's belief in personal responsibility regardless of one's fortunes in life. Those who wrote "as if the fault were in the system and not in the man or woman" were writing "a tawdry, weak falsehood," she observed in her diary. She created characters who assume they are not going to win but who press on anyway, as she did. This stoicism lends dignity to all of her fictional creations, their variable artistic merit notwithstanding.

The only important thing Page does not deliver is any special insight into Powell's collaboration with Max Perkins, her editor at the moment that her talents and her command of her art truly began to coalesce. One wonders if this gap was left unfilled out of a fear that the editor might loom too large in some minds, and put Powell in a category with those writers considered to have been more or less "made" by Perkins. If this was a concern it need not have been. Powell was in her own right a most serious and attentive student of the art of fiction. Both her failures and her considerable successes were very much her own. Page's book will bring more people to her.

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Victimized Verlaine

by John Simon

Is there anything harder to define than poetry? Beyond matters of prosody, imagery, cadence, and such—the mysterious essence and quiddity of poetry? What, for instance, makes the odd verse quintessentially poetic, engraved on the mind, conjuring up voluptuous feelings when we repeat it to ourselves as a mantra? The quality that, in J. A. Cuddon's apt phrase, "at once transcends and supports the meaning"? Take, for example, Thomas Nashe's "Brightness falls from the air;/ Queens have died young and fair," where the second verse is more charged with feeling, yet the first lingers more hauntingly in the memory. (I realize that some think *air* a textual corruption for *hair*, but let us not split hairs.) The entire verse is an image, with the progression of vowels from brighter to darker mirroring the meaning; but it is that unusual *falls* rather than, say, *fades* that shocks the line into poetry.

Or take Auden's "Lay your sleeping head, my love,/ Human on my faithless arm," where, again, the second verse is more charged and provocative, but the first is more "poetic." Partly so because, instead of the expected *sleepy*, we get the almost paradoxical *sleeping*; and partly because of those liquid *l*'s at the beginning, middle, and end of the line—the medial *l*, as it were, slightly masked by the *s* that precedes it—as if hooded by a lowered eyelid. It is in such near-intangibles that poetry resides; they are what, in Frost's famous dictum, poetry is —that which is lost in translation.

This elusive quintessence is also what makes the simplest poetry hard to translate: Heine's, for instance, or Verlaine's. And that is what makes *One Hundred and One Poems by Paul Verlaine*, translated by Norman R. Shapiro,[1] so regrettably useless. Useless, that is, as verse translation, which is what Shapiro thinks he is doing. I turned immediately to "Chanson d'automne," that very famous lyric from Verlaine's first collection, *Poèmes saturniens* (1866). Shapiro properly gives the French and English on facing pages; the present format unfortunately prevents this.

Les sanglots longs
Des violons
  De l'automne
Blessent mon coeur
D'une langueur
  Monotone.

The autumn's throbbing
Strings moan, sobbing,
  Drone their dole;
Long-drawn and low,
Each tremolo
  Sears my soul.

Immediately apparent is that Shapiro cannot render the regular interlacing of mas-

1 *One Hundred and One Poems by Paul Verlaine*, translated by Norman R. Shapiro; University of Chicago Press, 312 pages, $25.

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culine and feminine rhyme, which contributes much to the poem's music. The schema is AABCCB, with A and C masculine, and B feminine. Shapiro's *throbbing* and *sobbing* are top-heavy and, incidentally, the only feminine rhymes offered in the entire eighteen-line poem, and those in the wrong place.

But consider the extreme simplicity of the French, which translates literally: "The long sobs/ Of the violins/ Of autumn/ Wound my heart/ With a languor/ Monotonous." How spare this diction is as opposed to Shapiro's verbosity and prolixity which even lose the crucial *violins*: *strings* could refer to any number of nebulous instruments. Shapiro's vocabulary is both recherché and obsolescent: *tremolo* and *dole*; Verlaine's is a distillation of everyday language. Its instantaneous music is in the repeated closed *o* sounds that then shift slightly to the open *o*'s of *monotone*, like a distant echo to which the mute *e* adds its dying fall. In Verlaine, the lines flow; in Shapiro, we get the jarring staccato of a seeming quasi-molossus, "Strings, moan, sobbing," that loses Verlaine's *langueur*, yet another key word Shapiro forfeits. "Long-drawn and low" would be acceptable, were it not for the *rime riche*, anathema in English, of *low* and *tremolo*. "Drone their dole" sounds nice, but is both verbose and archaizing.

Tout suffocant
Et blême, quand
  Sonne l'heure,
Je me souviens
Des jours anciens
  Et je pleure;

When tolls the hour
I think of our
  Days gone by;
Pallid as death
I gasp for breath
  And I cry.

Literally: "All suffocating/ And pale, when/ The hour strikes,/ I remember/ The old days/ And weep." But who here is this "we" implicit in "our days"? The point is the poet's isolation, the I that is not part of any we. *Pallid* is a poeticism, and "as death" a cliché; "gasp for breath" might pass but for that hackneyed rhyme *death/breath*. And even that seemingly harmless *I* in "And I cry" feels pleonastic after "I gasp." "And cry" would be natural here, even if it muddies the scansion.

Et je m'en vais
Au vent mauvais
  Qui m'emporte
Deçà, delà,
Pareil à la
  Feuille morte.

And like a dead
Leaf, buffeted,
  Tempest-tossed,
I ride the air—
Now here, now there—
  Aimless, lost . . .

Literally: "And I go away/ In the ill wind/ That carries me off/ Hither and yon/ Like unto the/ Dead leaf." Note the stark denudedness of the original, which contains nothing so fancy as *buffeted*, or so literary as *tempest-tossed*. "I ride the air" makes it all sound like a joyride; even "Now here, now there" suggests something more of a nervous dilettantism than grim compulsion. Worst is that "Aimless, lost . . ." with that added, attitudinizing ellipsis: it is both pleonastic and didactic. And having the dead leaf appear at the top of the stanza, rather than at the end, robs it of the climactic terminal position that brings the poem back to the initial *automne*, which is to say full circle.

It can be argued, of course, that the dead leaf is a commonplace, as dead as foliage in the fall. But Verlaine's quadrisyllabic lines, which know when to run on and when to be end-stopped, triumph with their carefully wrought musicality. Observe how *morte* sonorously returns us to the earlier *monotone*, and how the very ordinary "Deçà,

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delà" taps into the poet's purpose; though the locution designates diverse locations, *deçà* and *delà* sound so alike, almost identical: a change of place that may bring only sterile sameness. And the dead leaf at the bottom of the poem conveys the ground, finality, finitude. Not aimlessness and loss, which has the pathos of the *poète maudit*, but just the plain, dead end.

Consider, next, the famous "Clair de lune" that opens Verlaine's second collection, *Fêtes galantes* (1869), and has been set to music by more than one composer. It suffices to look at the first line and at the last of its three quatrains. The poem begins: "Votre âme est un paysage choisi" (Your soul is a chosen landscape), with *choisi* achieving multiple and suggestive meanings. Thus *choice*, something superior and exquisite; *elect*, something instilled with divine grace; *selected*, picked out from various possibilities and willed into being—excogitated. So we have possibilities of superiority (refinement), transcendence (religious privilege, as of a chosen people), and artfulness (elucubration), opening up within a simple modifier. And what does Shapiro give us? "Your soul is like a landscape fantasy," which lacks even the concreteness of plain *paysage*, and suggests a vague daydream or a grandiose landscape architect's scheme to transform his back garden into Versailles.

Now for the conclusion:

> Au calme clair de lune triste et beau
> Qui fait rêver les oiseaux dans les arbres
> Et sangloter d'extase les jets d'eau,
> Les grands jets d'eau sveltes parmi les marbres.
>
> The calm, pale moonlight, whose sad beauty beaming
> Sets the birds softly dreaming in the trees
> And makes the marbled fountains, gushing, streaming—
> Slender jet-fountains—sob their ecstasies.

Examine how thoroughly Shapiro misses the boat. That the moonlight is pale is self-evident and unnecessary; but what is that "sad beauty, beaming" meant to do? If it is sad, how can it beam? *Beaming*, in English, signifies contentment, perhaps even smugness. It is there only for the rhyme, and subverts the simple dignity of *triste et beau*, which also sets up a discreet, self-effacing inner rhyme with *oiseaux*. (Nothing so obvious as *beaming/dreaming*.) And whereas Verlaine's birds are merely dreaming—probably denoting their silence or tiny chirps—Shapiro's are "softly dreaming," which makes one wonder what hard or loud dreaming would be like. Next, we do not want "marbled fountains" this early: for full impact, marble (not *marbled*, which suggests paper) should be withheld until the final panorama. And again, that "gushing, streaming" won't do for the simple *jets d'eau*, which avoids frenetic tautology.

But the great loss is the bungling of the closing picture, whose effect works through plainness and a striking contrast. It is, literally, "And cause to sob with ecstasy the water jets,/ The great jets of water, slender amid the marbles." Shapiro's "sob their ecstasies" is less direct and sexual than "sob with ecstasy," and, in any case, belongs in the penultimate verse right next to the spouts of water. That placement more strongly suggests the ecstasy of ejaculation, and justifies the last line's rapt incremental repetition: "Les grands jets d'eau," contrasted in their svelteness with the weight—in both sense and sound—of the final *marbres*. The plural conveys not so much a single marble basin as ample statuary (nymphs, fauns) surrounding the jet of water, and making that high spurt even more orgasmic. And remember: this entire *paysage* is a trope for the beloved's soul, with Verlaine's metaphor more vivid than Shapiro's simile. "Your soul is *like*," etc. And what sort of gobbledygook is "jet-fountains"?

"Colloque sentimental," a favorite of mine from the same collection, begins "Dans le vieux parc solitaire et glacé,/ Deux formes ont tout à l'heure passé." Ernest Dowson has translated this as "Into the lonely park all frozen fast,/ Awhile ago there were two

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forms who passed." Not perfect, but much better than Shapiro's "In the drear park, beneath a chill, bleak sky,/ Two shapes, two silhouettes come passing by." Note again the tautology: "chill, bleak" and, ludicrously, "two shapes, two silhouettes." And again, the obsolete *drear*, and the, to my ear, clunky molossus "chill, bleak sky." And why substitute the present tense for the sadder, more distancing past? The entire poem is translated as disastrously as its opening couplet.

Now for a later poem, the celebrated "Il pleure dans mon coeur," from the Mendelssohnianly titled *Romances sans paroles* (1874) which begins

Il pleure dans mon coeur
Comme il pleut sur la ville;
Quelle est cette langueur
Qui pénètre mon coeur?

Like city's rain, my heart
Rains teardrops too. What now,
This languorous ache, this smart
That pierces, wounds my heart?

Granted, *pleure-pleut* cannot be adequately Englished; even so, "city's rain" is as tin-eared and ungrammatical as it gets. Why not, at the worst, "city rain"? And whatfor that "What now," without even the excuse of a needed rhyme? And could anything be wordier and clumsier than "This languorous ache, this smart/ That pierces, wounds . . ."? Why not just *penetrates*, as in the text, or *suffuses*?

Still later, from *Sagesse* (1881), a stanza of the windowside poem "Le Ciel est, par-dessus le toit," which runs:

Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, la vie est là,
Simple et tranquille.
Cette paisible rumeur là
Vient de la ville.

My God, my God, out there . . . That's where
Real life is found.
A simple town . . . And everywhere,
Its gentle sound.

Could anything be more pedestrian and bathetic than "out there . . . That's where"? No less absurd is "A simple town," where the town is not simple, only its distant rumor feels *peaceful*, and thus inviting.

Finally, the seminal "Art poétique" from *Jadis et naguère* (1884), with its famous opening "De la musique avant toute chose" whose penultimate stanza reads,

De la musique encore et toujours:
Que ton vers soit la chose envolée
Qu'on sent qui fuit d'une âme en allée
Vers d'autres cieux à d'autres amours.

Music first and foremost, and forever!
Let your verse be what goes scaring, sighing,
Set free, fleeing from the soul gone flying
Off to other skies and loves, wherever.

Literally: "Music yet again and forever!/ Let your verse be the winged thing/ To be felt issuing from a soul in transit/ Toward other skies, to other loves." Redundance here has wrought its masterpiece. I also relish the aeronautical trope "the soul gone flying," and that wonderfully offhand *wherever*.

Norman Shapiro's verse translations are a powerful argument for prose translation —unless the translator is a man of Richard Wilbur's stature.

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Poems
by Robert McDowell & Donald Justice

Where and what you are

I see you in a hundred places. Now
You've gone into the writing where anything
Can happen, and nothing is still. If you know
A short-cut to the flesh, a sweet sighing
From the souls of trees that we might make our own
Just say it, so. At least tonight the moon
Is confident. The riverbed is wet
From a summer squall. Tonight I'll make a bet
With you. I'll wager that the hands that tear
The living from the writing disappear,
As will the distance that is like too many
Clothes between us. Naked in my fear,
You are a light that calms and covers me.
You own me now that you are everywhere.

—*Robert McDowell*

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Ralph: a love story

In what had been a failing music store
A man named Flowers opened the first cinema
In Moultrie. Ralph was the projectionist,
At seventeen the first projectionist.
And there was a piano from the store
On which the wife accompanied the action
With little bursts of von Suppé and Wagner.

Ralph liked the dark of the projection booth;
He liked the flickering images of the screen.
And yet because he liked it all so well,
He feared expulsion from this Eden,
Not so much feared as knew the day must come,
Given his luck, when it would all run out,
Which made the days more paradisal still.

Margot, the daughter, twenty and unmarried—
To tell it all quickly—seduced Ralph.
She let him think he was seducing her.
They used to meet in the projection booth,
Embracing wordlessly but laughing too,
Unable to suppress their self-delight.
Time after time they had almost been caught.
Then, as in novels, Margot became pregnant.

The cinema closed on Sundays. What Ralph did
Was slip off to the depot about dusk
To wait among the shadows for the train;
That night he watched with a sudden hurt nostalgia
The sparse pale farmlights passing from his life—
And he understood nothing, only that he was young.
Within a week or two he joined the navy.

Not that he could have guessed it at the time,
But those quick laughing grapplings in the dark
Would be the great romance his life would know,
Though there would be more women, more than he wanted
Really, before it was all finished for him.
And even in the last few years, working

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His final job, night watchman at a warehouse,
He might be resting on a stack of lumber
Toward morning, say, and there would come to him
The faces of the stars before the stars
Had names, only dark-painted eyes, and hands
That spoke the sign-language of the secret heart.
(Oh, not that he remembered. He did not.)

She wrote him over the first months two letters
In care of his parents in another town.
The envelopes were decorated boldly
With home-drawn hearts, some broken, pierced by arrows,
From which the mother understood enough
To save the letters but not forward them.
And when his tour of duty ended finally
He opened them and read them and was sorry.
It had been the happiness of his life.
But he could not go back to it. He could not.

So it was gone, the way a thing does go
Yet keep a sort of phantom presence always.
He would be drinking with some woman, lying
Beside her on a tourist cabin bed,
When something would come ghosting back to him,
Some little thing. Such paradise it had been!

And when it *was* all finished for him, at the end,
In the small bedroom of his sister's house,
Surrounded by his shelves of paperbacks—
Westerns mostly, and a few private-eyes—
Lying there on the single bed, half gone
On Echo Springs, he could not call it back.
Or if it came back it was in the form
Of images in the dark, shifting and flashing,
Badly projected, spooling out crazily
In darkness, in a little room, and he
Could not control it. It was like dying.
No, it *was* dying, and he let it go.

—Donald Justice

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Letter from London

New histories for old

by John Gross

The Kosovo war has inevitably dominated British headlines in recent weeks. But lesser wars—culture wars—have continued unabated; and if the Blair government has become somewhat less frenetic in its campaign to "rebrand' Britain, there have been powerful institutions more than willing to lend a hand.

Take the case of Florence Nightingale. We live in an age in which there is a move to dethrone every established hero sooner or later, and though Florence Nightingale wouldn't have seemed one of the more obvious candidates, her turn was bound to come. What would have been harder to predict (until a few years ago, at least) was that when the attack was finally launched, it would be the work not of some small radical group, but of an organization with nearly half-a-million members, including 250,000 nurses.

At its recent annual conference Unison, the union representing workers in the British National Health Service, voted in favor of moving International Nurses' Day from its present date, Florence Nightingale's birthday, to "something more appropriate." The motion was carried unanimously—unison indeed—and one of the speakers who proposed it came up with a comparison which surely deserves some kind of prize: "All over Eastern Europe statues of Lenin are being taken off their pedestals. It is in the same vein that the nursing profession must start to exorcise the myth of Florence Nightingale." Even this speaker conceded that Nightingale was "not necessarily a very bad person"—just a fairly bad one, perhaps.

So what were the sins of which she stood accused? She came from a privileged background. She supported the view that nurses should be subordinate to doctors (though some might maintain even now that up to a point this simply reflects medical realities.) She opposed the registration of nurses; she did not foresee a place for nursing in mental health. And the list could be extended. Serious writers on Florence Nightingale have never denied that she had her faults, and some of the limitations of her age; but on the whole they have been far more impressed by her achievements. No, the real give-away at the conference was the comment that she wasn't a suitable icon for "multicultural Britain," and that there were potential substitutes who didn't suffer from the disadvantage of being "white, middle-class Protestants."

A number of alternative names were in fact put forward: the one which attracted most attention was that of Mary Seacole, a Black, Jamaican-born, healer and herbalist who set up a hospital during the Crimean War on her own initiative. A remarkable woman, she was honored in her own time (Queen Victoria awarded her a medal), and she was by no means forgotten before Unison took up her cause. (I have often walked past the official plaque marking a house

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where she once lived.) That doesn't mean that it wouldn't be a good thing if she were better known, but to suggest that her achievements were as momentous as Florence Nightingale's is absurd. It is rewriting history—which as far as Unison is concerned was the object of the exercise.

The progressive uncoupling of Britain from its past, from its collective sense of itself, may or may not be a deliberate aim of the Blair "project," but it is certainly a conspicuous feature of the Blair era. What one should add, in fairness, is that it is a process which would be taking place anyway, that New Labour has merely speeded it up. Popular culture has been helping to bring about the same result; so has the decline in the traditional teaching of history.

It is against this background that I must admit to mixed feelings at the news that one of the most prominent features of the famous Millennium Dome is going to be a film—I quote from a newspaper account—which "reduces a thousand years of British history to half an hour of farce." (It is anticipated that it will be seen by 50,000 visitors a day.) As an example of its humor, the producer has singled out the fact that the time-travelling hero is going to try to find out whether Elizabeth I was "a virgin queen or a big ginger tease."

One doesn't want to make heavy weather of a spoof—and there are some honorable precedents. Over the past sixty or seventy years, for example, countless English readers have rejoiced in a burlesque (not so much a parody of history as of history textbooks) called *1066 and All That*. They have taken away from it such memorable lessons as the fact that, in the English Civil War, the Roundheads were Right but Repulsive and the Cavaliers were Wrong but Wromantic. A rather better joke, I'd say, than the one about the ginger tease. Still, the new film sounds as though it belongs in the same general tradition. What is unsettling about it is that it is a parody which is going to be shown to a public which has less and less idea of the thing parodied. If we are not careful, burlesque history is all we'll be left with.

But perhaps any past is better than none. Such seemed to be the view of the film critic of the London *Times*, looking back at the success of the movie *Titanic*. He didn't altogether disagree with other critics who had complained about "the piffling plot and shallow characters"; he might have added that it was a movie with a contentious and in many respects crudely anti-British political agenda. No matter: "it did a great service simply by making a past event speak to youngsters ill-used to looking beyond their immediate world."

We mustn't assume, though, that one past is as good as another. Institutions entrusted with preserving history are under enormous pressure to recast it in a more acceptable manner; and often, no doubt, it is what they want to do anyway. The National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, for example, has recently announced, with evident pride, a policy of sweeping modernization. There is going to be far less emphasis on explorers, naval heroes, and the whole British seafaring tradition, far more on the slave trade and such issues as global warming and marine pollution.

Well, old wrongs have to be righted, and balances have to be redressed: some of the changes are bound to be for the better. But it still lowers one's spirits to learn that historic portraits and models of ships are going to be removed to make way for such trendy, Turner Prize-ish artifacts as "a sculpture made by crushing a buoy in a diving chamber," or that one major new gallery is going to be dedicated—in perfect Blairspeak—to "The People's History of the Sea."

Virtually every British institution has bowed in one way or another to the winds of cultural change. You might suppose that watercolor painting, in its more traditional aspects, was one activity that would remain relatively immune, but that would be reckoning without a recent exhibition billed as "Men on women, women on men: a timely look at the sex war by the Royal Society of Watercolourists." Almost every day fur-

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nishes comparable items; they are, as the saying goes, too humorous to mention. And among major institutions, one which seems increasingly committed to a Blairite rebranding of Britain is the Conservative Party. Not long ago the Conservative leader, William Hague, made a keynote speech in which he called on his followers to celebrate "a Britain which is urban, ambitious, sporty, fashion-conscious, multi-ethnic, brassy, self-confident, and international." Some of those adjectives are fine, of course, but you can't help feeling that they are rather cancelled out by the others.

Certainly "brassiness" is the right word for a lot of things which are actually going on. It is reflected in all too many headlines, for instance. The *Guardian* doesn't merely praise a theatrical company for being "innovative": it announces in large type that it is "about to give Shakespeare lovers heart failure." Even the *Daily Telegraph*, the leading Conservative paper, is not above headlining a story, "I have seen the future and it sucks." And along with the bold stare and the brazen glare—inseparable from them—go an immoderate worship of showbiz personalities and an impossible scrambling-together of values. The British Tourist Authority is currently running a campaign designed to promote London as "the gay capital of Europe." Fair enough; its job is to attract foreign visitors. But it also seems to find nothing incongruous about proclaiming, all in one breath, that England is the land of Elton John and W. H. Auden, Boy George (a transvestite or multivestite singer) and Virginia Woolf.

You look, as always, to education for a bulwark against such tendencies; you find, all too often, that education fails to provide one. This is what makes the case of Chris Woodhead so important. Woodhead, the government's chief inspector of schools, is a powerful but (within the educational establishment) largely isolated figure, who has fought a tireless campaign for improved standards and rational teaching methods. In the course of it he has incurred the enmity of the teachers' unions and numerous educational pundits, but to its credit the Blair government has stuck by him. (He was originally a Conservative appointee.)

Now, however, his enemies believe that they have a stick with which they can beat him to the ground. It has been alleged that twenty-three years ago, when he was a schoolteacher, he had an affair with a seventeen-year-old pupil. Both he and the woman firmly deny the charge, but that hasn't prevented him from being subjected to bitter attacks from the teachers' leaders and their allies in the press. Whatever the truth about the long-ago relationship, the campaign itself is blatantly political (and one suspects that only the other day some of those conducting it were busy denouncing Kenneth Starr for intolerance and self-righteousness.)

The government, to its continued credit, is still standing by him, but one of the teachers' unions is threatening that unless he is dismissed it will attempt to initiate criminal proceedings against him (for formally denying the affair, rather than for the affair itself). As I write, the story is still unfolding; I may perhaps return to it at a later date.

Meanwhile, for anyone inclined to take too rosy a view of academic life in Britain, or at any rate the climate in which teachers have to work, I offer a passage from the current issue of CAM, the Cambridge University alumni magazine: "Undoubtedly any list of Cambridge alumni would include some of the finest and most creative minds in the world: Isaac Newton, John Milton, Charles Darwin, Joan Robinson, Stephen Hawking, Michael Winner, Emma Thompson, Eleanor Bron, Stephen Fry." One or two of the names on the list may not be familiar to *New Criterion* readers (Michael Winner is a film director, the last three are actors), but I think the general message is clear.

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Theater

Saying nothing, at great length

by Mark Steyn

Tony time is always fun—not so much as a seasonal exercise in stocktaking but as a chance to see whether there's any stock to be taken. The old rule used to be that if you were still running when nominations closed, they'd find a category to fit you into. But this year they decided it was time to reassert some basic values: the new play category can apparently embrace the late Tennessee Williams, who hasn't written anything in some time, but not David Hare, who very obligingly writes a play every other week and is now responsible for about 40 percent of all new work on Broadway every season. Were the Tony boys grateful? Hah!

They seemed to take especial pleasure in disdaining Hare's opus du jour (literally), *Via Dolorosa*, currently at the Booth and advertised by its producers as a "play." Don't go expecting much in the way of plots, characters, furniture, etc. It's actually a monologue about the Arab/Israeli conflict performed by Hare himself. Some of my colleagues referred to it as an after-dinner speech, which sounds even less promising, given that the Booth hasn't got a meals license and its uncomfortable chairs are not conducive to postprandial raconteurial wit. Fortunately, there isn't any on display. About two minutes in, you suddenly realize you've paid Broadway prices to hear an English public schoolboy talk about what he did in his holidays. Hare is not a compelling speaker—he doesn't have the stylistic flourishes of Liam Neeson, his leading man in *The Judas Kiss*, nor does he have the pert bottom of Nicole Kidman, his leading lady in *The Blue Room*. Now that the Thatcher terror has been dispatched, Hare felt it safe to accept a knighthood from the New Labour government. But it has to be said that, hands clasped limply together, the theatrical knight seems more like a pantomime dame. He has no great insights into Arabs and Israelis: this was, after all, his first trip to the Holy Land. But, if nothing else, Hare has never lacked for a sense of his own importance, and, as he puts it, "for some time my subject as a playwright has been faith. My subject is belief. And so it comes to seem appropriate—no, more than that, it comes to seem urgent—that the 50-year old British playwright should finally visit the 50-year old state." In other words, *Sir David Goes to Israel* isn't a bit of anonymous reportage, a spot of grubbing around, soaking up impressions, but a long-awaited summit between two stellar forces—like, say, *Abbott and Costello Meet the Wolfman*.

My God, what was the Tony committee thinking? The urgent-fifty-year-old line alone is funnier than the combined scripts of *The Judas Kiss*, *The Blue Room*, and *Amy's View*, Hare's latest Broadway import at the Barrymore, a meditation on theater's golden age and today's pop culture, which boils down to yet another variation on Hare's abiding complaint that his genius isn't more widely celebrated. He has a point. Survey-

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ing the vast accumulation of biodramas, think-plays, adaptations, star vehicles, and one-man shows he's dumped on the Broadway stage this last twelve months, the tone-deaf might be tempted to enquire, as Dame Edna Everage did of Jeffrey Archer, "Is there no beginning to your talents?" But the more discerning will recognize, as the Tonys should have done, that, on stage at the Booth every night, Sir David is creating one of the great comic figures of the age.

Elsewhere in the Tonys, *Twelfth Night* by Hare's less talented predecessor William (No Knighthood) Shakespeare was shut out of the Best Play category but did pick up a Best Score of a Musical nomination for Jeanine Tesori. If you saw the production, you'll know that *Twelfth Night* was not a new musical but an old play. But it seems a bit unfair, if you're going to nominate Miss Tesori for Best Score, not to toss the Bard a crumb for Best Book. Still, one appreciates the committee's dilemma. As often in this category, there's a compilation of Broadway heritage—*Fosse*—plus a compilation of African-American heritage—*It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues*. The audience for the latter, as usual, ain't nothin' but the whites, but the cast is so doggedly explanatory about these Negro spirituals, chants, and blues that I was reminded of the old BBC comedy sketch in which an Oxford linguistics professor translates line by line the soul anthem "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag." Here, for example, they helpfully point out that Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" is about some unpleasantness that once occurred in Mississippi, just in case the more complacent members of the bridge-&-tunnel crowd had assumed it was about an amusingly shaped kumquat or an eccentric homosexual.

Aside from the heritage shows, there's usually a nomination for a critically acclaimed commercial failure. This year, in an unusual departure, the nominated commercial failure was also a critical failure: Lincoln Center's *Parade*, a pompous, arid opera wannabe about the Frank lynching that, in what can only be seen as an incentive to spur the Broadway musical further down its kamikaze spiral, picked up nine nominations. When I say "the Frank lynching", by the way, I mean Leo Frank, the Northerner wrongly convicted of murdering a child in the South in 1913, not Frank Wildhorn, the composer the Tony types would most like to lynch for murdering the American musical in the 1990s. I happened to be present at what with hindsight was an historic meeting in London a decade ago when, during the coffee break of some workshop, Frank Wildhorn was presented to Andrew Lloyd Webber. "I'm going to be America's Andrew Lloyd Webber," said the bearded goof in the baseball cap. "Good," said Andrew. "They could use one." It's not necessary to agree with Lloyd Webber's proposition to acknowledge that Wildhorn has made good on his threat: today, he's one of only a select handful of writers—Rodgers, Lloyd Webber—to have three Broadway productions running simultaneously—*Jekyll and Hyde*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, and now the big one, *The Civil War*. He's currently adapting *Casanova*, *Dracula*, and *Blade Runner*—for three separate shows, I hasten to add, though I could be wrong: anyway, the point is he's got an option on every property you've ever heard of.

Instead of following Sondheim up his cramped, airless cul-de-sac, Wildhorn writes—in a big pop power-ballad style—overwrought, tremulous anthems that somehow defy any kind of choreography except standing downstage with arms out-thrust and heads held high, rousing the peasantry to work for social justice. His shows have devoted cult followings—*Jekyll and Hyde* has its "Jekkies," *The Scarlet Pimpernel* its "Pimpies," and doubtless *The Civil War* will produce its share of "Civvies." Yet he seems to have leapt straight to the *Aspects of Love/Sunset Boulevard* money-losing end of Lloyd Webber's career without the intervening stage of *Evita/Cats/Phantom of the Opera*. None of his shows has made a dime on Broadway, yet they're impossible to kill. *Pimpernel* has lost more dough than any production ever—about $19 million so far

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—but they keep shutting it down, cutting it, downsizing it, and reopening it in a spanking new version that promptly loses even more money even more quickly than it did before. No other New York author could get away with this, so how does Wildhorn?

The answer provides a gloomy insight into Broadway's future. It's well known that the Great White Way no longer generates its own plays: it brings them in from elsewhere—occasionally from the Goodman in Chicago, but mostly from London. Nonetheless, they're imported because they're thought to appeal to local tastes. The opposite process is at work down the lyric end: the Broadway musical is dead, but Broadway is still useful as a kind of out-of-out-of-town tryout for "the American musical"—shows that appeal to what patronizing network anchors call "the heartland." Wildhorn's square, clunky, non-gay musicals are widely considered to be a goldmine on the road, so New York is forced to endure them long enough to establish the brand name in places like Nashville. It's an odd paradox: motion pictures, supposedly a populist form, insist on inflicting their practitioners' weird obsessions—*The People vs. Larry Flynt*, *Boogie Nights*—on an indifferent public; the New York stage, supposedly an elite form, is doomed to a future as a workshop for the heartland. No wonder the Tonys hate Wildhorn.

Let *The Civil War* stand or fall on its first battle scene: a young soldier in blue shoots a young soldier in grey and rushes up to examine his kill. "Oh, no!" he cries. "He's my brother!" Wilde's observation that one would have to have a heart of stone not to read the death of Little Nell without laughing barely does justice to this moment. At least Dickens went to the trouble of giving his character a name before milking her demise. Not so Gregory Boyd, Jack Murphy, and Frank Wildhorn, the three credited authors it took to come up with "Oh, no! He's my brother!" We've never met the Union soldier or the Confederate soldier; we don't know them from Adam; we don't know if one's called Adam, or maybe Cain, or if the one he killed is Tom, Dick, or Harry. A man has killed his brother, and that's supposedly enough to move us to tears. Incidentally, even as crass exposition, Messrs Boyd, Murphy, and Wildhorn's line is a clunker: "Oh, no! [Pause] Fred! [Drops to knees] My brother!" would have a certain crude efficiency. But that obtrusive "He's" betrays the boy's awareness of us, the audience, at what's supposed to be the height of his pain. One can forgive the manipulativeness of the moment but not the incompetence.

Cy Coleman, the jazziest of Broadway composers, once said to me that he regards *Les Miserables* (the musical, as opposed to the novel) as "a *Reader's Digest* version of opera. It seems to give people the feeling of culture"—i.e., it gives them the *feeling* rather than the culture. But even in *Reader's Digest* shorthand, it seems a little over-compressed to dispense with all the vivid narrative and character that propelled these brothers to their destinies and instead insist that, simply because the two are siblings, it's by definition powerful and moving. The old 1950s cop show used to end, "There are eight million stories in *The Naked City*. This has been one of them." There are at least eight million stories in the Civil War: this had been none of them.

In the 1860s, in the theaters of New York and other cities up and down the Eastern seaboard, there was a sudden upsurge in plays about ghosts, restless spirits, returns from the graves, etc; the big special effect of the time was the Pepper's Ghost illusion —an actor's reflection cast onto a sheet of glass between stage and audience. In the midst of war, the young republic had to come to terms with a mortality rate it had never contemplated, and for many citizens, preoccupied with thoughts of the afterlife, those flickering, luminous figures were oddly comforting. A reverse process seems to be at work here. Across the nation, millions of Americans are cheerfully estranged from their siblings, spouses, parents, children; at that increasingly oxymoronic occa-

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sion, the "family meal," children sit across the table from ever-shifting conglomerations of step-sisters, half-brothers, mom's new "friend," gran'ma's new friend, etc. Yet the more we're inured to the sanctity of family in life, the more we prostrate ourselves before it in theory.

The other day on my local news, from WCAX Channel 3 in Burlington, Vermont, the announcer introduced what was supposed to be a heart-rending North Country angle on the tornadoes in Oklahoma: a woman in Vermont's North-East Kingdom was distraught because she hadn't heard from her boys out there and was unable to contact them. I was blubbing so loudly it took a while before the salient details sank in. The mother had certainly been upset by news of the twisters; she didn't know whether her sons were alive or dead. But then she hasn't known whether they're alive or dead for five years, which was the last time she'd heard from them, shortly before she moved to Vermont. Regardless of whether her boys have been swept up and their broken bodies tossed like twigs across the Oklahoma plain or they're whooping it up in a sports bar in Norman, their mom ain't gonna be hearin' from 'em. In other words, the real disaster here is not the tornado but this woman's family. Unfortunately, in our non-judgmental age, this story was too complicated for the limited range of TV journalism clichés, so Channel 3 found it easier to present her to us as a suddenly devastated mother.

The Civil War—the musical of the war of the same name—is constructed in much the same way. Come to think of it, it's not so much the musical of the war as the musical of Ken Burns's war. It goes without saying that history these days is not concerned with, say, General Robert E. Lee but prefers the tales of the little people who made up the general's cannon fodder. "We did not want to do *Shenandoah* or *Gone With the Wind*," said Wildhorn. "Instead of a big soap opera, we wanted to do something that was more real, something that would be a kind of emotional tapestry honoring the men and women who lived during those times. When you start reading all the books and the diaries and the letters, you realize that you can't make that stuff up." True—and you don't have to: it's a measure of how disconnected we've become from our past that the experiences of "ordinary" people now seem so extraordinary. Don't get me wrong: I like "ordinary" people. But it requires exceptional skill and craft to take a story that's typical and turn it into one that's emblematic. I've quoted Goethe before in this context, and it seems timely to do so again, for he said it best: "The poet should seize the Particular, and he should, if there be anything sound in it, thus represent the Universal" (June 11, 1825, in Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe*). If you create a specific character and bring him blazingly to life, you'll find that his very particularity becomes universal. But if you start by trying to be universal, you'll wind up with some bland generic abstraction.

That's what's happened to *The Civil War*—a collage of self-contained songs linked by snippets of Abe Lincoln's Greatest Hits and some rather confusing observations by Frederick Douglass. The work was conceived as a bookless "pop oratorio," but in practice this means that the blacks get to sing generalized gospel exhortations ("River Jordan") and the Union and Confederate forces are left to sing about how "when all is said and done, I guess we're all the same"—which isn't really true now, and certainly wasn't then, though it's undeniably the case that in Wildhorn's score they're musically indistinguishable. Meanwhile, to help us identify where we are, supertitles announcing various battles and dates are projected onto a series of scrims—a desperate device. This is *Via Dolorosa* on an unlimited budget: David Hare and Wildhorn have taken two of the most exhaustively analyzed conflicts in world history and assumed the public would be fascinated by the fact that they have nothing new to say about them, at great length.

Finally this season, a footnote to impeachment. The most vivid musical scene in

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Monica's Story comes when our heroine has sex with her high-school drama teacher in the lighting booth during a dress rehearsal of *Oliver!* On stage the chirpy Cockney ragamuffins, elbows splayed, thumbs in their armpits, were bellowing: "Consider yerself at 'ome!/ Consider yerself part of the furniture!" Up in the lighting booth, Monica's drama teacher was considering himself at 'ome. Later, Bill Clinton would consider her part of the furniture. When I read this, I made a mental note to drop a line to Lionel Bart, composer, lyricist, and only begetter of *Oliver!*, alerting him to his role as musical accompanist to one of the great moments in history. But I never got around to it, and the other morning I woke up to find a small "Late News" item in the paper announcing that Lionel Bart had died in London.

He was a man of the theater, but he was also an emblem of the Swingin' Sixties—a lost utopia that Lionel, in Beatle boots, Nehru jacket, and love beads, bestrode like a colossus. In London, it was a time when coarse-voweled East Enders were being eagerly taken up by the smart set: he was, as the obituarists coyly put it, "romantically linked with Judy Garland," a splendid formulation that tells you everything you need to know about his sexuality. After *Oliver!*, he bought homes in New York and Malibu and a castle in Tangiers. He threw a lot of parties and, aside from the usual peanuts and drugs, he also liked to have finger bowls piled high with large-denomination bills for his guests to dip into. They didn't stay piled high for long. He could probably have afforded the dextrous North African rent-boys, but it was the vast retinue of showbiz mediocrities and hangers-on that proved such a crippling burden. "Well," explained Lionel in his soft-spoken Cockney, "it was a period in my life when I was doing a lot of experimenting with LSD."

In Lionel's case, the experiments were not entirely successful. He sent Noel Coward the script for his musical of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, not the recent smasheroo Disney version but a more idiosyncratic adaptation Lionel called *Quasimodo!* (He was fond of exclamations.) "Brilliant, dear boy!" said Coward. "But perhaps a touch . . . *abstract*? What drugs did you write it on?" The castle went, so did the homes in Malibu and New York, and eventually so did his copyrights to *Oliver!* and the other hits, sold off when he had nothing else left to unload. When they film the lighting-booth scene in *Monica!*, the Bart estate won't get a penny for the background music.

Lionel! was supposed to be the story of Britain's Irving Berlin, a self-taught rags-to-riches multi-talent, but somewhere along the way it turned into the story of Britain's Fats Waller—an irresistible tale of extravagant appetites, squandered copyrights, and artistic dissipation. He wound up in a small flat above a shop in Acton, not one of the fashionably grimy quarters of the metropolis but a nondescript tract of west London. By the time I knew him, he was strictly a mineral-water guy—a cautious Rip van Winkle in a Nathan Detroit suit, for whom whole decades had gone missing. He had, for example, no memory of the Carter Presidency, lucky fellow. "I did so many drugs in the Sixties," he said, "that I was basically out of it for the Seventies. Did I miss anything?"

"Not really," I said. He was as agreeable an example of hedonistic excess and self-destruction as one could meet. His successors learned from his example. Instead of partying the night away with Princess Margaret, Andrew Lloyd Webber hired Prince Edward to make the tea. Indeed, showbusiness seems to have given up entirely on hedonistic self-destruction: Lloyd Webber won the Queen's Award for industry. All the more reason to treasure Lionel Bart, a spectacular reminder of a vanished theatrical era when showbusiness celebrities were still more show than business.

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Art

Goya in Philadelphia

by Karen Wilkin

We've all been to exhibitions where the whole was more than the sum of its parts, shows where not entirely stellar works combined to make an illuminating point, enlarge our understanding of a period, or change our conception of what an artist was seeking. But what about an exhibition where the parts are greater than the whole—which is a fairly accurate description of the wonderful, perplexing, engaging, and in some ways disappointing "Goya: Another Look."[1] Jointly organized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille, the exhibition is small, focused, and full of splendid paintings (and some splendid examples of Goya's prints), yet, oddly, the cumulative effect is less than the impact of the individual pictures on view.

The motivating premise for the show was simple, according to the Philadelphia Museum's brilliant curator of European art before 1900, Joseph J. Rishel: "a desire to see this complex and variable figure as a whole." How best to realize this ambition? By pulling together a tightly concentrated selection of works by the elusive, multivalent Spanish master (described by Rishel as "a cheerful eighteenth century painter sandbagged by French Romanticism") and take a fresh look at these pictures in the light of the latest Goya scholarship. An impressive group of international Goya specialists was assembled for the task, but even then, Rishel writes in the mini-catalogue accompanying the American incarnation of the exhibition, "our task, like any Goya project, was not an easy one. In the history of modern painting, few artists occupy a position as difficult to define as that of Goya. His life has been romanticized into a drama of conflicts, and it is difficult to return to something like the original tenor of his work." The team's hope was that the show would not only clarify some of the long-standing confusions endemic to Goya studies—among other things, questions of authenticity and inaccurate notions of the significance of particular genres—but also "bring us, in a more direct and focused manner, an image of Goya as a painter closer to the historical figure."

The exhibition sketches the entire trajectory of Goya's career using five essential categories of his art: early designs for tapestries, religious commissions, portraits, prints, and the "strange and enigmatic works" that the artist kept for himself. These last pictures were listed in a celebrated inventory of the contents of Goya's studio made after the death of his wife, Josefa, in 1812. (Goya was then sixty-six and lived another fourteen years.) It is relatively

1 "Goya: Another Look" opened at the Philadelphia Museum of Art on April 11, 1999 and will be on view until July 11. It was previously seen at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille from December 11, 1998 until March 14, 1999. A catalogue of the exhibition is available from the Philadelphia Museum of Art (72 pages, $12.95 paper).

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easy to identify most of these pictures, since Goya gave many of them to his son, Javier, marking them conspicuously on the front with a white "X." The famously disturbing "Black Goyas," now in the Prado, with which the artist later decorated his country house, "La Quinta del Sordo" ("House of the Deaf Man"), are thought to have been made as replacements for those given to Javier.

The "strange and enigmatic works" that Goya kept are the linchpins of the Philadelphia show. They include one of an extraordinary pair of Goyas at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille, *The Old Women (Time)* (c. 1808–12)—its companion, *The Young Girls (The Letter)* (c. 1813–20), is also on view in Philadelphia and together they are an acerbic commentary on the transience of youth and the ravages of age. Included, too, are Goya's only still lifes, straightforward images of very dead comestibles, about half of them reunited in Philadelphia. (The most remarkable is one of the severed head and split shoulders of a sheep, painted about 1808–12 and now in the Louvre, which somehow transforms the reds of blood and meat and the whites of bone and fat into an implacable, architectural, poignant, and peculiarly beautiful, almost abstract composition; Damien Hirst, eat your heart out.)

"Our point," Rishel writes, "is to open for investigation the qualities of consistency and constancy in [Goya's] work, of the private made public and the public made private, of its range and diversity." In the context of the show, the subjects, character, touch, palette, and mood of the pictures that the artist kept for himself are meant to serve as standards against which to measure the other works—the portraits, religious commissions, and even the prints and the fantastic little cabinet pictures that both introduce and follow the "private" Goyas in the Philadelphia installation. But because the show is small and works seem to have been selected not only for their individual merits, but also as exemplars of whole categories, the diversity of Goya's oeuvre often seems more evident than its consistency (I don't mean just the contrast between the lighthearted early tapestry cartoons and the dark, passionate mature paintings). The show often seems more like a casual assembly of self-sufficient works than a demonstration of a coherent thesis. Of course, no one really expects definitive answers these days, and does it come as a surprise to be reminded that seeing Goya's work of any period in depth requires a trip to Spain? On the plus side, the paintings in the Philadelphia show are generally very fine, while a representative selection of prints from the museum's own holdings provides a useful dialogue with the canvases, confirming once again the accuracy of the view that holds that the intimate, directly executed, urgent prints, with their uninhibited imagery, are the real point of entry into all of Goya's art. So why do I sound less than whole-heartedly enthusiastic? I'm not sure.

It can be argued that many of the most arresting pictures in "Goya: Another Look" have been seen within the last decade in this country. A large and stunning assembly of major paintings, drawings, and prints, "Goya and the Spirit of Enlightenment," was seen at New York's Metropolitan Museum and at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1989. (Never mind whether or not there actually *was* a Spanish Enlightenment; it was a great show). In 1992, while the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille was being renovated, a selection of outstanding works from the museums's wide-ranging collection, including those two riveting Goyas, was seen at the Met, and in 1994, a fascinating and comprehensive exhibition of Goya's cabinet pictures, studies, and *modelli*, "Goya: Truth and Fantasy, the Small Paintings," was seen at the Art Institute in Chicago. A year later, the Metropolitan organized a fine little show around its own collection of Goyas, including a memorable encounter between the undisputedly authentic *Majas on a Balcony* (1808–12) from a private collection and the Met's own problematic version of the picture.

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All this doesn't diminish the pleasure of coming upon even the most familiar of Goya's works again, subtly altered by their new context in Philadelphia. For example, the Chicago Art Institute's *Boy on a Ram* (1786–87), an elegantly dressed little boy riding a black ram, gains by being surrounded by other preparatory works for tapestries. Instead of appearing to be a delightful image of a pretty child amusing himself, it becomes part of a Rococo decorative tradition of allusions to the seasons; a wall text helpfully points out that the ram is a spring astrological sign. It is as exciting as ever to see the Minneapolis Museum of Arts's powerful *Self-Portrait with Dr. Arrieta* (1820), a wrenching near-pietà, painted in gratitude for the artist's recovery from a desperate illness, in which a pale, seemingly moribund Goya is tenderly supported and embraced by the physician who saved him. In Philadelphia, the presence of other late works even darker in mood underscores the emotional nakedness and raw painterly energy of this devastating image, provoking thoughts of the rough, intense pictures painted by Titian and Rembrandt at the end of their lives.

There are other bonuses, as well. Since the show is installed in galleries embedded in the space allotted to the Philadelphia Museum's permanent collection, interesting relationships are suggested by chance encounters with other artists' work as we enter and exit. Unexpected connections are also suggested because the pictures in "Goya: Another Look" often share space with fine examples of period furniture—a feature of the museum's permanent collection. In the gallery with the "private" Goyas, a formal arrangement of Empire couches and chests has the odd effect of subverting the apparent modernity of the fierce, rough-hewn, dramatically inflected paintings, reminding us that they are not prefigurations of Expressionism, but, more accurately, products of the Romantic era. (I'm not convinced, though, that the elegant red silk upholstery of the couches really helps.)

And there are real surprises: seldom-seem pictures pried loose from private collections or borrowed from less frequented museums, which are themselves reason enough to go to Philadelphia. One of these, originally earmarked for Javier, is the bizarre *Lazarillo de Tormes (The Blind Man's Guide)*, (c. 1808–12, private collection), a haunting image of a man with closed eyes prying open the mouth of a hapless boy whom he holds imprisoned between his knees. The brooding canvas is a dark, near-monochrome, enlivened only by a few bold slashes of cadmium red that resolve themselves as a blazing fire in the background. Uncomfortable as much because of the way the figures are jammed together into the bottom of the canvas as because of the man's brutal gesture, the picture becomes even more disquieting when we learn the story that it illustrates—a popular black comedy of the day about a blind man's guide who ate a sausage intended for his destitute master. (The blind man is opening the boy's mouth to inhale the smell of his vanished meal, which does make for interesting connections with the seventeenth-century tradition of paintings evoking the senses, but there's still that mixture of compositional compression, formal tension, and depicted violation.)

Some of the show's most unexpected works are to be found in the portraits, particularly those of women. Among the earliest of these is a forthright, affectionate, rather informal image of Doña María Teresa de Vallabriga y Rozas (1783, private collection), a commoner who married an eccentric member of the royal family. (Goya was apparently close to the couple.) The bravura brushwork of Doña María's silk wrap, the feathery stroking of the fur edging, the staccato "pointillism" of her lace collar, and the smooth, delicate rendering of her features and powdered hair, all make this a typical, albeit most seductively painted, eighteenth-century portrait. And Doña María's rosy pout, huge eyes, and clearly arched brows all seem fairly conventional attributes of eighteenth-century beauty. What is star-

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tling, however, is the painting's intimacy and directness; everything is pared away except the head and shoulders, thrust forward by a dark background. We are left with a confrontational image of a distinct individual—someone poised, self-contained, and a little shy.

At the opposite end of the emotional spectrum is the Getty's full-length *Marquesa de Santiago y San Adrián* (1804), an obviously tough customer—she was famous, we are told, "for her loose morals, independent manner, and quick wit"—who stares us down, dares us to come closer, and, though doll-like, stiff, and a little small for the space, easily dominates the loosely brushed arid landscape that stretches behind her. The aristocratic Marquesa chose to be portrayed in the costume of a *maja*—the street punk look of the period—which gave Goya ample opportunity to paint dazzling gold embroidery on her sleeves, a transparent mantilla, and nifty pink silk slippers, but neither these delectations nor the painter's rapid, fluent brushstrokes soften the impact of that hard little face, the "don't mess with me" effect. (I kept thinking of Goya's slightly earlier portrait in the Prado of the family of Carlos IV, that amazing crowd of similarly unappetizing types in ravishingly painted clothes.)

What may be the most irresistible portrait in the show is *Doña Antonia Zárate* (c. 1805–06, National Gallery, Dublin), brilliantly composed as a narrow triangle of variously inflected blacks (Doña Antonia's gown, curling hair, and fragile lace mantilla), and framing warm ivory shapes (her head, neck, and arms in their long crumpled silk mitts), both looming against a nearly flat ground, which is divided horizontally into zones of warm brown and roughly stroked gold (the wall and the sofa on which Doña Antonia sits). The portrait is a marvel of economy and of complexity: a simple structure that depends upon a rich orchestration of both illusionistic and real paint textures, of crisp, fluid, and subtly nuanced edges, and of severely limited but sumptuous hues. It is also an immensely sympathetic portrait of a beautiful, introspective woman who doesn't flinch from our gaze, but who remains ultimately withdrawn. The wall text identifies her "as a celebrated actress, daughter of a famous actor, wife of a singer, and sister to a poet and playwright." She is so appealing that it is saddening to learn that she died only a few months after the portrait was completed.

A biographical subtext runs sporadically through the show, but it takes close attention to make the connections. As installed in Philadelphia, there is a sort of preamble, a small group of pictures that precedes the tapestry studies. A study for a painting of the apparition of the Virgin of the Pillar to St. James (don't ask) and a small, earlier finished picture of the same event situate us in Zaragoza, the town where the vision took place. Neither is particularly distinguished, so it helps to know that Goya, born near Zaragoza in 1746, lived and worked there for the first twenty-nine years of his life (except for about five years—1763 to 1768 or 1769—that he spent in Madrid as the teenage assistant of the painter Francisco Bayeu). A self-portrait of a plump, confident Goya, hair streaming down his shoulders, gives us an idea of what the young painter looked like around 1775, when he left Zaragoza definitively, summoned to the capital by the Principal Court Painter Anton Raphael Mengs to work on cartoons for the Royal Tapestry Factory. An image of a significant patron who introduced Goya to the aristocracy is included in the preamble with the portrait of an architect friend Don Ventura Rodríguez, painted in 1784 when Goya had been established in Madrid for almost a decade producing light-drenched pastoral images (like the ones in the next gallery) intended to be translated into woven decorations for royal apartments.

By 1784 Goya had tried and failed to get the post of Court Painter—he wouldn't be awarded that rank until 1789, although three years earlier, at the age of forty, he had been named "Painter to the King," a less pres-

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tigious appointment that carried a smaller stipend, no small matter to a monarchy that had been forced to close the Royal Tapestry Factory for three years because of financial difficulties. But by 1784 Goya had already won unanimous election to the Royal Academy of San Fernando (the ultimate art establishment bastion of the period) and would later be named the Academy's Assistant Director of Painting. As a final point, the preamble shows us one of the portraits of aristocrats that began to be commissioned from Goya in the 1780s. This is what must be the show's best-known image, the Metropolitan's portrait of Don Manuel Osorio de Zuñiga (1788), the rigid, formally posed little boy with the dashing red suit, the cage of finches, the magpie on a string, and the demonic cats. In a gesture of uncanny marketing strategy, this is the first image to confront a visitor to "Goya: Another Look."

The preamble's two versions of the apparition of the Madonna of the Pillar also serve to introduce one of the exhibition's main questions, that of the importance of Goya's religious paintings, which have frequently been regarded as problematic because of the evident, often savage, anticlericalism of his prints. One view holds that his commissioned devotional paintings must have been executed merely as products to fill a demand, even though they include some of his most potent, assured works—witness the ravishing murals in Madrid's little church of San Antonio de la Florida, which is difficult of access, open inconvenient hours, and worth whatever it takes to get there. "Goya: Another Look" attempts to draw a distinction between the anticlerical and the antireligious, and attempts, too, to revaluate the significance of Goya's works for the church. To an extent, it succeeds. Engaging as they are, the small studies included in the show remain problematic. They have the radiance, looseness, and transparency of a Tiepolo decorative scheme, as well as some of Tiepolo's frothiness, all of which serves as a useful reminder that the Venetian pyrotechnician was in Madrid, working for the Spanish crown, from 1762 until his death in 1770—almost exactly the same time that the young Goya spent there assisting Francisco Bayeu. (It's worth remembering, too, that the 1812 inventory of Goya's studio included three paintings by Tiepolo.)

If the evidence of the small devotional pictures in the show is inconclusive, two large paintings of the genre make a better case for Goya as a painter of impressive, resonant religious pictures, particularly the lean, contemplative *Death of Saint Joseph*, (1787, Museo de San Joaquín y Santa Ana, Valladolid). Dramatically different from the exhibition's little sketch of the same subject, which dissolves into a Rococo whirl of pink, lavender, and yellow, complete with a flock of putti, the Vallodolid picture is a severe vertical-horizontal composition constructed out of clearly bounded masses of ochre, blue, and brown. Everything is kept more or less frontal or parallel to the picture plane. The reclining Joseph is an assertively horizontal, beautifully modulated block of pale ochre, crossed by an equally assertive, equally beautiful vertical block of celestial blue—the standing Jesus seen, like Joseph, in severe profile. Mary, in a greenish blue veil, faces us from the far side of Joseph's bed, but leans toward her son as though thrust there by a shaft of dense, dusty light. Dead center, where in the sketch Joseph's head forms the hub of a "bouquet" of pale colors, the dying saint's fingers and those of Jesus nearly touch, anchoring the composition, turning it in on itself, and adding a focal point of great eloquence and delicacy. The giddy motion and marzipan hues of the sketch have been replaced by a slow, stately rotation and a luminous, subdued palette that evoke both liturgical solemnity and private bereavement. Evidence of genuine religious feeling or brilliant pictorial intelligence? The Valladolid picture suggests why even an anticlerical Goya was esteemed as a painter of religious subjects, a view reinforced by the inclusion of the Cleveland Museum's *Saint Ambrose*, (c. 1796–99), although the latter is as notable for gor-

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geously painted silk as it is for depth of feeling. In the end, it's impossible to draw intelligent conclusions from only two paintings, no matter who selected them. Still, failing a tour of the Spanish religious institutions where Goya's altarpieces and devotional works are installed, two is better than none.

There is no question, however, about the potency and originality of the best of Goya's secular paintings, and the Philadelphia show is well supplied with fine examples, most memorably the two enigmatic pictures from Lille. The earlier of the two, *The Old Women (Time)*, is a terrifying image, as bitterly grotesque of any of the prints, showing a pair of skeletal harridans, peering into a mirror on whose back is written "Que tal?" ("What's happening?"). A winged figure brandishing a broom swoops in behind them and stares over their shoulders into the mirror, his wings carving the claustrophobic space of the background into angular planes. Part of what makes the picture so disturbing is the tension between the savagely represented women, the clenched knot of attention on the unseen reflection, and the delicate, dry, transparent painting of the long-nosed woman's fashionable white gown. Yet as we look, those rapid brushstrokes stop suggesting luxurious fabric and begin to call up dissolution and corruption. As Rishel points out, the picture has often been interpreted as "a cruel satire on vanity and misguided ways, with the figure of death quite literally about to clean it all up." But, he asks, given what we know about Goya, "can it be so moralizing and so simple?"

Whatever the original meaning of the picture, the later pairing with Lille's other masterpiece *The Young Girls (The Letter)* (usually dated later, perhaps from the 1820s) raises still other questions. New research confirms that *The Old Women* was enlarged to the same dimensions as *The Young Girls*. Why? The closer we look, the more ambiguous the connection seems to be. *The Young Girls* is both like and unlike the earlier painting, thematically and structurally. The lovely young *majas* are grouped very much as the old crones are, but they are seen full length, standing, against a shifting, airy background of laundresses at work. The sheltering parasol opened by the young woman with the black mantilla creates a less abrupt version of the downward diagonal thrust of the wings and shoulders of the flying figure in *The Old Women*. In *The Young Girls*, however, this downward plunge is slowed and diffused by a flicker of whites, silvery greys, and warm ochres, so that the inventive disequilibrium of the composition seems benign and enriching rather than destabilizing; the effect is rather like that of one of the early tapestry cartoons, transformed by decades of the experience of painting and living.

Yet as Rishel reminds us, the jury is still out on these paintings. No definitive arguments have been advanced about their meaning. Does the context established by "Goya: Another Look" suggest any answers? Not really. But the show does give us an opportunity to see these absorbing pictures again, along with a good many other fine Goyas. It's probably greedy to ask for anything more.

Exhibition notes

"The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect" at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 14–June 1, 1999.

The last artist viewers encounter on exiting the exhibition "The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect" is the eighteenth-century French painter Hubert Robert (1733–1808). During his lifetime, Robert achieved renown for his paintings of architectural ruins, a niche in which he displayed an academician's proficiency and a modicum of melodrama. His lasting influence in the arts was not as a painter, however, but as *Garde du Musoeum* of the Louvre. Helping to shape, inventory, and install the museum's collection, Robert took an operative role in

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the establishment of the Louvre as a public institution. (Robert even made the museum his home for a time.) His *Imaginary View of the Grand Galerie in Ruins* (1796) is a portrayal of the Louvre centuries hence. This picture of physical and cultural devastation, complete with eminent works of sculpture scattered amongst the rubble, was, one imagines, something of a lark for a painter whose passion for art was lifelong and devout. Certainly, anyone who cares about the life of art could hardly wish on a museum the fate as conjured up in such a melancholy jest of a picture.

Yet *Imaginary View of the Grand Galerie in Ruins*, as seen at MOMA, serves as a punchline to the malicious joke that is "The Museum as Muse." The show's title would seem to imply that the museum is a touchstone for inspiration. For the many artists (and non-artists) who regularly visit places like MOMA it is, of course, just that. Yet, the exhibition's take on the museum is anything but motivational. "The museum as an institution, . . ." writes Kynaston McShine, MOMA's Senior Curator and the organizer of show, "has had great meaning for contemporary artists, and they often have felt strong emotional connections to it, whether of love or hate." There's no doubting that artists have had—and will continue to have—complex relationships with museums. But one doesn't have to venture too far into McShine's show to realize that the true subject of "The Museum as Muse" is contempt: contempt for the standards cultural institutions are meant to uphold.

The show's thesis is that the museum is a silly, hypocritical and, yes, elitist establishment stuffed with objects that are antiquated when not merely meaningless. (Charles Willson Peale's *The Artist in His Museum* (1822) was included, one feels, as a postmodern dismissal of connoisseurship.) This brand of blinkered cynicism is representative of a generation nursed on the facile verities of conceptual art. For the many contemporary artists included in the show, the museum is a cultural morgue incapable of sparking a sense of connection. So, instead, they pursue neo-Dadaist pronunciamentos with the knowledge that inclusion in an exhibition at MOMA looks good on a résumé. In the meantime, McShine bites the hand that feeds him in the service of intellectual fashion. The bad faith "The Museum as Muse" engenders would be enough to make one's head spin if it weren't par for the art world's course.

"To Conserve a Legacy"
at the Studio Museum in Harlem,
March 17–July 11, 1999.

What a relief it is to take a trip uptown to the Studio Museum in Harlem for the exhibition "To Conserve a Legacy: American Art from Historically Black Colleges." The Studio Museum's sober and even reverential approach to the works of art currently in its care is in contrast to the trendy fripperies found at MOMA. The two hundred or so pieces on display are culled from the collections of Clark-Atlanta, Fisk, Hampton, Howard, North Carolina Central, and Tuskegee Universities. The show is a distinctly American one and includes a wide variety of figures like Georgia O'Keeffe, Josef Albers, Alfred Stieglitz, Arthur Dove, and Charles Demuth. The "conservative" aspect of the show refers not only to an artistic and historical consciousness, but also to a practical one: as one of the show's initiatives, a training program for the preservation and rehabilitation of art has been instituted. Such cultural cognizance is imbued with dignity—not just for the art on view, but (unsurprisingly) for the museum's patrons as well. This deference was summed up by one of the museum's guards—who, after all, spend more time with the art than anyone else: "This show is damn good, isn't it?"

Given the grab bag nature of compilation exhibitions such as this one, there's bound to be some damn good art betwixt the merely ordinary and the outright clunkers. Indeed, most of the paintings, sculpture, and prints found at the Studio Museum are accomplished, bland, and earnest. The majority of photographs are of interest primar-

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ily as historical artifacts, but, as such, their value is considerable. Having said that, there are jewels to be found in "To Conserve a Legacy." An anonymous photograph (c. 1920) of a school for farmers is an unforgettable image that transforms the documentary into an eerie kind of geometric poetry. Arthur Dove's tiny *Moon* (1928), with its silvery and seemingly omnipotent title character, is one of the artist's most intensely realized images. William Henry Johnson's *Untitled (Farm Couple at Work)* (c. 1941), whose sturdy forms and smoldering colors embody the ache of physical labor, shows this deservedly well-known painter at the peak of his creative powers. *Playland* (1948) by Jacob Lawrence is a typically sophisticated clustering of angular forms and jarring spatial juxtapositions; it concisely and affectionately exemplifies the cheesy allure and raucous ambience of an amusement park. These are but a few of the high points—works by Nat Werner, Charles Demuth, Barkley L. Hendrick, Leonard C. Hyman, and Alfred Stieglitz are also noteworthy. It is works like these that buoy "To Conserve a Legacy" and make it a heartening experience.

"Hans Hofmann" at the
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,
April 13–October 17, 1999.

"The physical symbol of France is a cock" wrote Hans Hofmann (1880–1966) in 1949, punning on the word's double meaning in English while likening the "strength, tenacity, and courage" of the School of Paris to a more than obvious priapism. Surely, there have been more elegant metaphors in the history of art, yet the vulgarity of Hofmann's statement is indicative of his earthy and robust sensibility. "Hans Hofmann in the Metropolitan Museum of Art" is a small show that captures the go-for-broke nature of this pivotal figure in twentieth-century American art. The exhibition contains about a dozen paintings, a gallery of drawings, and a sampling of studies by his students, including Lee Krasner, Fritz Bultman, and Myron Stout. Hofmann's status as a teacher is, of course, legendary and has often colored his reputation as a painter. Is Hofmann's artistic achievement hampered by pedagogy, as some would have it? Certainly, a painting as aerodynamic as *Summer* (1965) serves as a literal transcription of his notion of "push and pull." Hofmann may have been an inspirational teacher, but he never, in a sense, stopped being a student, and an avaricious one at that. His work's frantic drive has an almost adolescent propulsion to it. Hofmann's was a talent so precipitant that it was as if he had constantly to prevent himself, artistically speaking, from tripping over his own feet.

But trip over them he did—this is part of Hofmann's lumbering charm. Was he an incredibly flawed master or an erratically brilliant journeyman? Such distinctions are rendered almost moot by the palpable elation of Hofmann's work. Anyone who loves the art of painting—*pure* painting, one is tempted to amend—will find themselves gamboling through the Met after having viewed the work. Hofmann's gift was, it is true, encumbered by his inability to achieve an artistic middle-ground or, if you will, "rightness." He either pushes too hard or not hard enough. Looking at *Little Cherry* (1965), one can understand why Hofmann didn't pursue it any further—the painting's oversized Rorshach blot has an intrinsic pictorial presence. Still, its what-the-hell beauty is thin, both literally and figuratively. But Hofmann's pictures could also be congested and overworked. He was all too capable of fine-tuning—fiddling with, really—a picture above and beyond the call. Is it an abrogation of critical duty, then, to posit that the artist's expansive and good-natured spirit makes such equivocations irrelevant? To a degree, yes. The limitations of Hofmann's generous art are real enough. But one can't help but feel that he was, at the risk of sounding chummy, one of the good guys. Ultimately, Hans Hofmann may be a great painter who painted few great paintings.

—*Mario Naves*

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Architecture

The Guggenheim in Bilbao

by Michael J. Lewis

Since its opening in October 1997, the new Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, has been greeted with giddy and almost universal acclaim. For Ada Louise Huxtable, it is "one of the most beautiful museums in the world today." Certainly as a piece of free-form sculpture it is without peer. Clad in shimmering titanium panels, it billows like a full-rigged ship in a gale and is photogenic from virtually any angle. But is it as good as the claims made on its behalf? Can any building survive being declared a "Lourdes for a crippled culture" by *The New York Times*?

More than is usually the case, the Bilbao Guggenheim is as much the creation of client as architect.[1] When Thomas Krens became director of the Guggenheim in the late 1980s, he declared the art museum in crisis, both as institution and building type. It was an eighteenth-century idea ("the encyclopedia") thrust into a nineteenth-century building type ("the modified palace"). Most sat on constricted urban sites, whose modest display and storage capacity had long since been outpaced by collection growth, forcing most of the holdings to be kept perpetually out of sight. The modern museum, Krens proclaimed, required a new concept as well as a new form.

The solution lay in a profoundly twentieth-century institution: the corporate franchise. Krens envisioned a worldwide network of affiliated branch museums so that the Guggenheim might circulate the vast reservoir of art languishing in storage. Projects were launched in Salzburg and in Massachusetts, but ran into delays, making the Bilbao building the first test case of his concept.

Krens's audacity seems to have won an unusual amount of discretionary authority from his board. He personally selected the Los Angeles architect Frank Gehry, a designer known for his quirky deconstructed compositions but not necessarily as a great maker of space. Krens felt that a distant site like Bilbao required a sensational building, which suggested Gehry, whose celebrated deconstruction was literal rather than literary and whose compositions were burlesque affairs of fragments, evoking a modernism of artificial ruins. But for Bilbao, Gehry proposed a much tauter closed composition of writhing blocks, derived from his Weisman Art Museum in Minneapolis (completed in 1990).

From the outset architect and client had their eye on Frank Lloyd Wright's original building, which they tried to outdo. And in certain categories their museum does so —in the boldness of its abstraction, the aggressive originality of the galleries, and the spacious sweep of its atrium. Nonetheless, this looking over the shoulder has given something of the sense of a sequel to the

1 The best account of the building of the Guggenheim is *Frank O. Gehry: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao* by Coosje Van Bruggen (Guggenheim, 1998).

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result. The Bilbao museum is something of an unraveled version of the New York original, in which the central atrium is retained while Wright's spiral of galleries is cut into lengths and deployed outward from the hub in radiating wings in starfish fashion. The longest of these arms extends along the river, dipping under a traffic bridge that crosses the site and then surging upwards into a flaring tower. Functioning only as a visual exclamation point, this tower serves as a kind of scherzo to the main block of the museum, against whose buoyant Futurist forms it presents a Constructivist collage of sharp-edged limestone panels and steel beams. Gehry manages to cite both Boccioni and Tatlin in the same sprawling composition, surely an architectural first of some sort.

The act of entrance is a self-conscious inversion of the traditional museum experience. Rather than reverently ascending a ceremonial stair, the visitor descends a long ramp-like approach to emerge at the base of a soaring atrium, the museum's most astonishing space. Here an irregular arrangement of twisted, waving piers of stone and metal rise as high as the vaults of Chartres cathedral, terminating in a lagoon-shaped skylight. But this vertiginous vista is the only straightforward axis in space. Otherwise the architecture provides neither a clear hierarchy of movement nor fixed reference points—other than the intermittent views of the city and river outside—forcing the visitor to decide which of the meandering passages might lead to the galleries beyond. All this evokes the scale and ceremony of the monumental spaces of architectural history, but without the sense of resolution or higher formal order that a classical rotunda might convey. If order is implied here, it is of a fractured or incomplete sort, in the process of forming or perhaps tumbling apart.

Gehry created two types of exhibition galleries. For "dead artists," he fashioned traditional galleries, rectangular with vertical walls, while contemporary artists were assigned irregular, free-form galleries, since as "living artists, . . . they can fight back." The centerpiece of this—and indeed of the whole museum—is the east gallery, a rambling nave of space that stretches nearly four-hundred-and-fifty feet in length, under a white Piranesian ceiling of bridges, catwalks, and slender ribbons of roof truss. This was to demonstrate Krens's doctrine that contemporary sculpture required museum spaces of Egyptian scale. And as a kind of public demonstration, he commissioned from Richard Serra a steel sculpture over seventy feet in length: a magnitude formerly limited to public plazas.

Of course, if both container and contents grow in the same proportion, the effects of scale are somewhat undercut. (For this reason Gothic sculptors multiplied rather than magnified the figural sculpture on the great cathedrals.) And the irregular shape of the gallery together with the unrelieved whiteness of its walls does indeed have a peculiar effect on the perception of size. Without converging parallel lines as a guide of the sort that conventional spaces possess, it is impossible to calibrate the recession of the space in perspective. As a result the gallery actually seems smaller than it is, which has the odd effect of reducing the size of the sculpture within it, which cannot have been the intention.

The most celebrated aspect of the Guggenheim, its glistening titanium skin, was an afterthought. Gehry originally intended a cladding of a lead and copper alloy, but when this was rejected on environmental grounds, he shifted to titanium. Although more expensive than steel, it is also much lighter, which meant that the supporting skeleton could be made thinner and cheaper. In fact, the cladding is less than two-fifths of a millimeter in thickness, so thin that individual panels bulged or warped like foil when put in place and they still ripple in a strong wind.

This gives the walls a mottled surface which flickers attractively in the maritime climate of Bilbao. The panels of titanium are laid like shingles, producing parallel seams

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across the skin of the building that have no relation to its architectural lines, just as the warp of a fabric has no relation to the body beneath it. Where they come to the raking edge of a form, they simply terminate, which gives the cladding a rather non-architectonic character. Without question, when the clouds lift, and the building begins to blaze and shimmer in sunlight, it is a spectacular sight. It is this aspect which gives the building its terpsichorean character, and the sense of uninhibited exuberance around which all criticism of the building revolves.

Gehry's agitated sculptural forms have been repeatedly compared to Baroque architecture. To be sure, they lack the schematic flatness that afflicts much recent architecture, and their splendid sense of spatial drama and of implied movement has something of the robustness of the seventeenth century. But the distinctiveness of his language lies precisely in its differences from the Baroque. A High Baroque building, such as a facade by Borromini, is analogous to a fictive body in which the physical qualities of weight, heft, resistance, sag, and lift are evoked through certain architectural devices. Elements such as rolling walls, projecting cornices, and molded reveals are sculpted into the mass of the wall to give the sense of dimples and puckers in the building. But it is this quality that is wanting in Gehry's building. The walls of the Guggenheim can no more be modeled in depth than the skin of a balloon. Its curvilinear surfaces derive not from modeling a plastic material but from the manipulation of a frame. They are not voluptuous in the sense of Baroque form; rather than swelling and bulging, their principal action is writhing and twisting, the effects that can be achieved by rotating a steel frame.

Critics have made much of the computer system used by Gehry to design his structural frame, a system originally devised to calculate the shape of the fuselage of a jet fighter. But his real accomplishment has been to discover a way of twisting the two-dimensional lattice of the frame in order to achieve sensuous expression. The resulting forms are graphic; they imply motion but not mass. This is the museum's limitation, but also its expressive force. Architecturally this may well be the most important consequence of Gehry's work, the liberation of the steel frame from the stringent language of the grid.

The Guggenheim's claim that it has inaugurated a new conception of the museum institution cannot yet be evaluated, for it is primarily a marketing innovation rather than a cultural one. If it is a commercial success it will be judged as satisfactory. As for its other great claim, to have pioneered a new concept of the museum building, this too must be qualified. For while claiming to abolish one nineteenth-century form for the museum, Krens has in the end substituted another in its place. In its cavernous exhibition floors, celebratory entrance pavilion, and general lack of gravitas, the Bilbao Guggenheim—in conception and program—is essentially a world's fair building, of the sort pioneered at the great expositions of the last century.

Gehry would not be troubled by the comparison. For all the overblown rhetoric that accompanies them, his works remain cheerfully indifferent to the rarefied theory that stamps so much deconstructionist architecture. Instead he maintains his predilection for bold, overstated imagery that evokes the scale and disjointedness of highway signs rather than the urbanity of the city street. In this runs a certain West Coast sensibility, which has become increasingly influential in American architecture—and now looks to become so internationally as well. Ultimately Frank Gehry's Guggenheim is very much a California building: light, frivolous, and untroubled by the intellectual Sturm und Drang that has distracted so many contemporary architects.

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The media

Gestural politics

by James Bowman

At its margins, human life dissolves into banality. Our milestone moments seem to invite other people to hang on them millstones of ponderous rhetoric of which few ever question the desirability or even the necessity. Having for family reasons just attended commencement exercises at New York University, I can report, for instance, that the jazz musician and impresario Quincy Jones believes that racial stereotyping is "stupid" and is prepared to provide at length several examples of this stupidity—in case, presumably, you happen to be stupid—and that the retiring Treasury Secretary, Robert Rubin, has learned that "The only thing certain is that there is no certainty." Therefore, says Mr. Rubin, we "need to be decisive in the face of uncertainty" and recognize that "good decision-making is the key to good outcomes." This was said on the day that his own decision to resign as Treasury Secretary was announced, but there nevertheless appeared no larger significance to the observation.

Rubin also said that he believed there were "no absolutes" and that in this belief he was "supported by modern science." He might have added that he was also supported by modern politics, at least as practiced by his boss, Bill Clinton. But one absolute that seems to have escaped the hecatomb of sacred cows is that at graduations, as at other times of separation—"marriage, and birth, and death, and thoughts of these," as Larkin says—even the excellent Mr. Rubin is left with nothing to say but the obvious, the trite, the inoffensive. In the same way, words like "Doesn't she make a beautiful bride?" or "He looks just like his mother" or "At least she didn't suffer for long" have about them a kind of sacredness, if only because such things have been said so often before by so many generations of our predecessors. They were said at our births, our christenings, and our marriages, and will be said at our funerals in some "special shell" built just for the purpose of containing them and suggesting, like academic pageantry, a sense of mystery and solemnity rather than the tedium they so often induce elsewhere.

It is therefore not entirely the fault of television and the media if their response to the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado, was to indulge themselves in a bacchanal of banality the likes of which have not been seen since the funeral of the Princess of Wales. The box in our living rooms, though it is getting bigger and bigger all the time and will doubtless soon attain Imax proportions for those who can afford to house it, is small in its essence, small in spirit. Merely by bringing its window on the world into the home, television shrinks the world to domestic proportions, with all the comic triviality that domesticity implies. It is therefore unable to suggest the eternal dimension of the events it commemorates in the way that ecclesiastical architecture does, or public ceremonies in

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places you have to make an effort to get to. In the open air and a splendid academic gown, under the triumphal arch in Washington Square, even Robert Rubin looked as if he must have something to say—or so I thought, judging by what I could see up there on the jumbotron.

But television's bourgeois earnestness also lacks a sense of irony, or of its own limitations, and so we see that, when something like Littleton or the Death of a Princess comes along, the media wallow in po-faced pieties of an entirely predictable kind, shot through with therapeutic jargon about "healing" or "closure." Early reports that at least one of the murders appeared to have been racially motivated also brought out, though briefly, the anti-racialist pieties that are useful for any occasion nowadays. In addition, there was led forth an endless parade of "experts" on how to recognize the "warning signs" of incipient Harrises and Klebolds. Afraid your son or daughter might massacre his or her high school classmates? Better buy *Time* or *Newsweek* to find out what you can do (hint from *Newsweek*: "spotting the warning signs isn't enough"). Talk about news you can use!

But all the "lessons of Littleton," whether of the practical or the theoretical sort, had the intellectual heft of the "healing tree" that "grief counselors" encouraged bereaved or anxious pupils to make and cover with "leaves" bearing messages like: "I've learned that hate is destructive." That the media treat such jejune fare as true spiritual nourishment is presumably related to their belief that they fulfill a quasi-priestly function, standing above mere "partisanship" on a higher plane of spiritual enlightenment. But one consequence of their doing so is the further ritualization of public discourse. By now the arguments for gun control (on the left) and against media "violence" (on the right) are so familiar that they could be reduced to liturgical form, if anyone thought to go to the trouble, and chanted by antiphonal choirs of pundits on "Crossfire" with no smaller degree of edification to the public than the existing media-managed "debate" provides.

Not for the first time, one has the impression that America's civic religion, as it is practiced by the media and the increasing number of those who play to the media, represents a failure of politics, a confession that the things we profess to care most about are not important enough to require us to compromise. We can agree to differ on guns, or media violence, or abortion or any of a number of other matters—even to differ violently at times—because so few people are so dissatisfied with the status quo as to demand a consensus other than the de facto one. With the bombing of Yugoslavia we see that this political failure applies, incredibly, even to war. You may like or dislike the war; you may think we should do more or could do less. But we don't care enough either about the Kosovans slaughtered by Serbs or the Serbs slaughtered by NATO's bombs (or, for that matter, the Kosovans slaughtered by NATO bombs or the Serbs slaughtered by Kosovans) to demand anything different from or more politically or intellectually coherent than the vague half-war NATO is waging as I write.

Probably nobody really expects political solutions to social problems anymore. Maybe there are none. Certainly none is obvious in the case of the Littleton massacre. But the demand for political gestures remains high—something which it was the genius of Bill Clinton to recognize and exploit to his own and his party's advantage. Even practicing politicians now enjoy the luxury, long thought the prerogative of the media, of being able to preach endlessly without ever having to do anything, at least anything substantive. It was presumably because gestural politics had served Clinton so well for the previous seven years that he thought he could fight a gestural war. Instinct naturally suggests that this is the point at which the usefulness of gesture runs out, but in the post-Monica era, when all the old rules seem to have changed, it would hardly surprise us to find Slobodan Milosevic standing shoulder to shoulder

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with Clinton at the next National Prayer Breakfast, confessing that ethnic cleansing had been a "mistake" and giving thanks for the promised American aid package to rebuild his shattered country.

If it lacked a little of the chutzpah of a gesture like that, Clinton's own response to the Littleton massacre was a classic of gestural politics in its own right. "We don't know yet all the how's or why's of this tragedy," he said; "perhaps we will never fully understand it." And then, mangling the quotation in his best *Good News Bible* style, he added:

> St. Paul reminds us that we all see things in life darkly, that we only partly understand what is happening. . . . We do know that we must do more to reach out to our children and teach them to express their anger and to resolve their conflicts with words, not weapons.

That was particularly rich, of course, coming from the man who had been bombing the hell out of Serbia for the previous month, but no one in the media seemed to make that connection. It was like a headline I saw in the British press, which has a long tradition of jingoism about imperial wars, at the time when a nail bomb went off in a gay bar in London. Prime Minister Tony Blair, who does *not* have a long tradition of jingoism about imperial wars but who is being very jingoistic about this one, had compared the explosion (in which at least three people died) to "ethnic cleansing" in Yugoslavia and had promised, said the headline, that "The Bombers Will Fail." Both he and the newspaper seemed to have forgotten that, in Yugoslavia, the bombers had been sent by him.

Still, the president's psychobabble sounded almost nuanced in comparison with the knee-jerk reaction of most of the media. As *The New York Times* editorial put it on the morning after the massacre, "it is not too early to begin drawing lessons." Indeed, it is never too early, or too late, to be drawing this particular lesson, which was "the urgent need for concerted action by Congress, state legislatures, and gun manufacturers to keep guns out of the hands of troubled youngsters. School shootings had been in decline this year, but yesterday's blasts in Colorado are a grim reminder that guns are still too readily available." That was a "lesson" that had, in fact, been drawn long before and only awaited some new occasion to be brought forward once again, possibly in conjunction with the therapeutic lesson. Thus Janet Reno said: "We've got to get guns out of the hands of young people. We've got to make sure they have the counseling, the support to help them come to grips with the anger of their life when it occurs."

Incidentally, not even the fact that the murderous teens, Harris and Klebold, had previously been required to enroll in "anger management" courses and had passed with flying colors seemed to blunt the edge of the urgency in the calls for such therapeutic nostrums. The demand for banalities of all kinds was just too great, particularly at the "violence summit" convened by the president three weeks after the massacre. A lesser Democrat might have been content with using this occasion to make the one gesture guaranteed to win him the unstinting praise of the media with little or no risk of any resulting substantive change. He could, that is, simply have heeded *The New York Times*'s ringing call for new anti-gun legislation. That, as the National Rifle Association and others persistently pointed out, some twenty-two existing gun laws were broken by the Colorado killers seemed to none of the advocates of this response to the killings a reason for skepticism about the usefulness of passing still more laws for future killers to break.

Everyone recognized, that is, that the laws were not meant to be useful in preventing future killers from going about their business but only in providing slender if sufficient documentation for the proposition that those who passed the laws had "done something" in response to these kill-

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ings. Clinton was naturally not averse to "doing something" of this sort, and his proposed new law closing the "loophole" by which private gun owners at gun shows had not had to do background checks on those who bought guns from them had a rather comical history. First defeated in Congress, the bill passed only a day later when several Republicans switched their votes—by some reports in response to lobbying by George W. Bush, the Governor of Texas and prospective Republican presidential candidate. Bush presumably wanted the party to appear on the "moderate" side of the issue, which is to say the side that is always willing to support symbolic measures so long as they have no material usefulness whatsoever.

Whether it was on account of pressure from Bush or a naturally-occurring hunger for such "moderation," the episode showed that the Republicans were learning from Clinton who, without breaking with the gun-controllers, characteristically tried to be on both sides at once. "You know, I could take either side in the guns-versus-culture argument" he said to Democratic contributors in Seattle. Thus, both at the "violence summit" and later in the same week in his weekly radio address, he had some mildly critical words for the entertainment industry. "We cannot pretend that there is no impact on our culture and our children that is adverse if there is too much violence coming out of what they see and experience," he said, and went on to propose that those responsible for movie marketing should not show too much violence in previews for R-rated films that children (who supposedly couldn't see the films themselves) might see. Likewise, they should encourage exhibitors to enforce the rule against under-seventeens getting into R-rated films and think again about the amount of violence allowed under the PG rubric.

Once again, no one could suppose that such exhortations were anything but symbolic. Hours after delivering them, Clinton attended a Hollywood fund-raiser sponsored by the DreamWorks trio of Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg, and David Geffen. To them and the other Hollywood Clintonites, he said that "There's no call for finger-pointing here" and that nothing he had said about fabricated images of violence should be construed as having made out "anybody who makes any movie or any video game or any television program [to be] a bad person or personally responsible with one show for a disastrous outcome." Some Republicans pointed to Clinton's hypocrisy, but we are now too used to symbolic politics for either the media or Clinton's political opposition to have much stomach for criticizing him on these grounds. Just as neither Clinton nor any mainstream Democrat proposed a Draconian gun ban like that imposed by Britain after the Dunblane massacre, so no Republican critic of the corruption of popular entertainment was willing to propose anything that might be construed as "censorship."

For "moderates" on both sides now long to come out just where Clinton did on the "violence summit," which he summed up by saying: "This was exactly the kind of session I had hoped for, where everyone was talking about the problems and the opportunities. . . . No one was pointing the finger of blame." There was an interesting counterpoint between all this talking and the stress placed by administration officials and others on "listening." Said Janet Reno on "Meet the Press," "We all have to learn to better communicate with the children of America . . . to train our police officers to listen, train our teachers to listen." She had learned from Littleton, she said, that "kids have something to say, something to contribute. They're not all bad. . . . It's important to listen to our children." Tipper Gore, appearing on the same show also stressed the need to "listen," but at the summit itself it was not listening but talking that was the order of the day. As Katharine Q. Seelye of *The New York Times* observed: "So many factors were identified—the Internet,

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movies, parental responsibility, domestic violence, lack of religious faith, a coarsening of the culture—that guns were lost in the shuffle."

Not surprisingly, *The New York Times* misses the point of the New Democrat, Third Way kind of gesturalism, which is precisely to make sure that *everything* gets lost in the shuffle. Where political success depends on avoiding disturbance to the status quo, listening like acting (in other than symbolic ways) has dangerous implications. Far better to keep talking, and if all the talk consists of things that have already been said, so much the better. As one participant in the "summit," sixteen-year-old Miss Pheniece Jones of "US Kids TV," put it to Miss Seelye: "It seemed like ordinary stuff that people say all the time." Miss Jones's own most memorable experience at the summit came from having met Andrew Shue, a TV star from "Melrose Place," whom she described as "really nice."

Of course, for teenagers of a less equable disposition than Pheniece's, just having to listen to so much anodyne but otherwise effectless rhetoric can itself lead to violent fantasy. In the movie *Election* which opened the week after the Littleton shootings, we see what happens when candidates for president of a high school Student Government Association give speeches of staggering banality. First Miss Go-getter talks about meaningless measures to solve non-existent problems in a way that is strikingly Clintonian. Then a brainless jock with a passing resemblance to Bob Dole reads an even worse speech couched entirely in vague generalities and illustrated with reminders of his exploits on the football field. Finally, the latter's sister, who is running against him out of revenge for his having unwittingly stolen her lesbian girlfriend, gets up and says that the whole election is a charade, and that the only thing she would do as their president would be to abolish pointless assemblies like this one. Everyone cheers wildly.

We sympathize at once. One of the consequences of increased mealy-mouthedness is increased violent fantasy, just as one of the consequences of increased violent fantasy is increased mealy-mouthedness from those who, like Mr. Clinton, don't want to "point the finger of blame." It seems a vicious circle inseparable from the banalization of public discourse, which is in turn the inevitable result of the media's making such a shibboleth out of "moderation" and "bipartisanship." There are doubtless many who are glad that the aftermath of the Littleton killings did not pit one group of honest men, who want to ban the private possession of firearms, against another, who want to appoint a board of censors to oversee the film, television, and recording industries. I myself think that, probably, doing nothing at all makes more sense than either of these two starkly rational alternatives (or, indeed, both). But the further entrenching of gestural politics, which has been the actual consequence, may turn out to be the worst outcome of all when, one day, America has matters of national survival in hand and nothing to address them with but good intentions and a political language consisting only of "ordinary stuff that people say all the time."

Editor's note: Readers are reminded that *The New Criterion* does not publish during July or August. Our next issue will appear in September.

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Verse chronicle

Vanity Fair

by William Logan

Rita Dove's slickly written poems are professional in a completely professional way. Her poems have a message, though rarely a subtle message—more often it's a billboard or full-page ad. I understand why Black poets, particularly ones as venerated as the former poet laureate (sixteen honorary doctorates and counting), are under pressure to be Role Models and write Public Poetry that will instill Ethnic Pride and Celebrate Diversity (such poets' dreams are in Capital Letters). *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* is less a book of poetry than a public relations exercise.[1]

When you live the public life too long, when you're used to standing on stage with celebrities speaking to celebrities, receiving *Glamour* magazine's Woman of the Year Award or the Golden Plate Award from the American Academy of Achievement (can such a thing exist?), when university presidents practically hurl themselves beneath buses attempting to give you honorary degrees, it's easy to forget how easy it is to write bad poetry, that the best intentions, in this best of all possible worlds, won't help when the words lie dead on the page. You might want to write a poem that will encourage children to read, and you might go about it like this (the poem is titled "The First Book"):

Open it.
Go ahead, it won't bite.
Well . . . maybe a little.

More a nip, like. A tingle.
It's pleasurable, really.

You see, it keeps on opening.
You may fall in.

Sure, it's hard to get started;
remember learning to use

knife and fork? Dig in:
You'll never reach bottom.

It's not like it's the end of the world—
just the world as you think

you know it.

I had to quote the whole thing, because who otherwise would believe it? I love the smirking condescension of "Sure, it's hard to get started." Any self-respecting child would rise up with knife and fork and stab the speaker in the eye. Children know when they're being condescended to; it's only adults who've forgotten. But has the poet, cozy in her family-values truths, even tried to recall what it was like to learn to read? You have to be taught what letters are, and how they sound; you have to sound out each word, painfully and slowly. It's a tedious, frustrating miracle, earned by hard graft. Dove's smug, soothing rendition is a

1 *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*, by Rita Dove; W. W. Norton & Company, 95 pages, $21.

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fairy tale, where you swallow a little cake and *Presto!* you can read.

The main subject of Rita Dove's new poems is the life of Rita Dove (once there were confessional poems—now there are publicity releases). Not just the life of Rita Dove, but *The Amazing and Remarkable Life of Rita Dove*, starring Rita Dove, written, produced, and directed by Rita Dove, with special effects and additional dialogue and music composed by Rita Dove. It's hard to remember that Dove was once a poet of modest but real talent (it's said no matter how badly Jorie Graham and Rita Dove now write, Helen Vendler will find a way to praise them). When she celebrates breast-feeding, in the general inflation of effect she's attended not by a nurse but by an "African Valkyrie." A sequence honoring Rosa Parks uses her quiet bravery as just another chance for the poet's self-serve opportunism.

Only a couple of odd, allusive poems remain to suggest what gifts this poet has lost. "The Camel Comes to Us from the Barbarians" is called an "allegory," though it's not clear why at first. It's dryly funny, and works by sidelong glances; but then you realize it's not about camels—it's about slavery ("A rare commodity, these beasts—// who cannot know/ what beauty wreaks, what mountains/ pity moves."). In the dumbing down of Dove's verse, it reminds you that this poet once had sly intelligence.

How could most poets resist the clamor and boosterism Dove enjoys? You're asked, say, to write a poem to commemorate the restoration of the statue of Freedom on the Capitol dome, so you write about a bag lady, because Freedom might walk among us ugly and ignored. It doesn't even occur to you it's a fairly dopey idea.

> consider her drenched gaze her shining brow
> she who has brought mercy back into the streets
> and will not retire politely to the potter's field
>
> having assumed the thick skin of this town
> its gritted exhaust its sunscorch and blear
> she rests in her weathered plumage
> bigboned resolute
>
> don't think you can ever forget her
> don't even try
> she's not going to budge
>
> no choice but to grant her space
> crown her with sky
> for she is one of the many
> and she is each of us

You write it, and it's printed the same day in the *Congressional Record*. Then it's published in a fine-press edition, "commissioned as the four millionth volume of the University of Virginia Libraries" and made "globally accessible by the University of Virginia in a multimedia version on the Internet." After all that, who has the heart to tell you it's awful, that it's written in slogans, that you've forgotten completely what words can do?

I could almost review Adrienne Rich in my sleep (sometimes, reading her, I feel I *am* asleep). I know more or less what she's going to say and how she's going to say it. Like Ashbery and Merwin and some other older poets, she's past wrestling with her art: a modern Narcissus wants to be loved for herself alone. Rich settled for the seduction of style long after her style was seductive anymore—it's a generation since her poems disturbed despite their ideology (or, briefly, because of it). The feisty, troubled poet of *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), however starved and predictable the verse looks now, was still alive to her art.

Midnight Salvage[2] uses all the sad properties of Rich's recent work: the fragmentary sentences of a decrepit Pound; the reckless phrasing ("my art's pouch/ crammed with your bristling juices"); the clumsy typographical invention, by Cummings out of Chrysler; lines vain with vanity ("wanted for the crime of being ourselves"), or stiff with cant ("Art doesn't keep accounts/

2 *Midnight Salvage: Poems 1995–1998*, by Adrienne Rich; W. W. Norton & Company, 75 pages, $22.

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though artists/ do as they must// to stay alive"), or like shop-soiled Whitman ("what humiliatoriums what layers of imposture"); the breast-beating of sour radicalism; the lists of capitalism's *disjecta membra*.

Her language, at times pitched unfashionably toward beauty, is everywhere undermined by the coarseness of her politics, the anaesthesia of party-platform emotion. Rich is by now so suspicious of beauty she can hardly let a few phrases of description pass without guiltily whipping herself. Too often the subjects, however distant from her little world, are forced into its convent-cell conventions. A poem on René Char, a poet who served in the French resistance, sits humiliatingly within Rich's "vigil" in California. You want to remind her that California isn't at war, that nothing could be less relevant than her irrelevance. The photographer Tina Modotti's life gives way—must give way—to the poet's auto-hagiography. "These footsteps I'm following you with/ aren't to arrest you," she says unctuously (you'd think she was campaigning for canonization). Rich possesses these artists like a slumlord his properties.

Surprisingly, here and there the poetry is stirring again, like Lazarus. There's never a whole poem (that would be too much to hope for); but, in these lines sneering at her former, well-paid professorship at Stanford, you begin to remember why Rich wrote poetry in the first place.

> Under the conditions of my hiring
> I could profess or declare anything at all
> since in that place nothing would change
> So many fountains, such guitars at sunset
>
> Did not want any more to sit under such a window's
> deep embrasure, wisteria bulging on spring air
> in that borrowed chair
> with its collegiate shield at a borrowed desk
>
> under photographs of the spanish steps, Keats' death mask
> and the english cemetery all so under control and so eternal
>
> in burnished frames : : or occupy the office
> of the marxist-on-sabbatical

How razor-edged that "marxist-on-sabbatical"! Suddenly a world primly divided between good and evil looks uncertain again—she seems ashamed of her old Manichean stridency (at one time she refused to admit men to her readings). Ideologues always excuse past excesses by claiming they were "necessary." Rich hasn't quite reached that embarrassed state of contrition, though she seems aware apology might be appropriate.

Of course, soon she's back spouting a martinet version of Marx, scribbling more postcards from the war against whatever it is the war's against—racism, sexism, every -ism but the -ism of -isms. She's the self-medaled, self-beribboned witness of the century's wrongs, even if the radical leanings of her work have become ever more regressive, frozen into rhetoric. Only for a brief moment, in a passage about dating a paraplegic veteran while she was a student at Radcliffe, does the fog of politics lift and a life emerge, a life of doubt and girlish insecurity, a life with tremors of regret. In those scattered lines, you see someone drowning beneath the surface of this awful verse. You know someone's down there, something terrible's happening, and that there's nothing you can do.

The blood-soaked, rain-drenched history of Ireland is torn to its root with guilt as deep as religion. Ireland has a past coiled in its present, and Irish poets may be forgiven for wanting to stand apart from bloodied ground. Many have taken their language into exile (one of the guilts is that for so many the language is English), and often into the well-upholstered exile of the foreign university: Seamus Heaney at Harvard, Seamus Deane at Notre Dame, Tom Paulin at Oxford, Paul Muldoon at Princeton, and Eavan Boland in the Stanford professorship once held by Adrienne Rich.

Boland's new book, *The Lost Land*, lives in a luminous realm of Irish mist—the language is so thick with the impasto of the

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past, her Ireland is more a painting than a place (you'd never guess she spends her days in sunny California).[3] The book divides its exile between a long poem on native ground and a scattering of poems haunted by Irish memory (memory is a lost land, but the title's a wicked pun—there's *land* in Boland, too). The long poem, "Colony," begins at the end of bardic poetry, with the knowledge that English colonization was the death of such poetry and the implication that *this* poet means to revive it. *Colony* is an important word in academic life—even if you speak the language of empire, in Colonial Studies you side with the colony.

Ireland is so rich in conflict you'd think Irish poets just wade into a bog and spout poetry. It's true—prick Heaney or Michael Longley or Derek Mahon and they bleed verse as Yeats did. None may be quite the poet Yeats was, but you see in them a bartered, battered inheritance. In too many of her poems, Boland tries to wrap herself in the fashionable cloak of tradition without the tedium of writing poems; and indeed much of her work is about writing poems, a process psychologists used to call compensation. (No one wants to hear how difficult writing is. It sounds like whining, or bragging.) Boland may want to bleed poetry, but often she just leaks self-importance: "I am your citizen: composed of/ your fictions, your compromise, I am/ a part of your story and its outcome./ And ready to record its contradictions."

Ireland's contradictions are only gestured toward (there's a lot of heated arm-waving in these poems). Boland likes to work by visual nuance, by words in their mythic aftermath; but image is useless when the politics act so vague and complacent (or, worse, so humorless). There's no sense of a moral topography that would set Ireland's wrongs against Ireland's rights.

Often Boland borrows Heaney's props without paying interest on them. She loves being professionally Irish—she'll end a poem referring to "losses such as this:// which hurts/ just enough to be a scar.// And heals just enough to be a nation." That's what happens when vanity meets lack of irony—a poetry far too impressed with itself.

When her bardic imagery collapses into such portentous gravity (and unconscious hilarity), the poet must think the reader stone deaf or quite stupid. Boland is capable of striking phrases ("the faraway,/ filtered-out glitter of the Pacific"), and one or two remind you how dyed in metaphor real history lies: "The patriot was made of drenched stone." But then it's back to her numinous, theatrical rhetoric (all her poems seem delivered by Mrs. Patrick Campbell), the one-sentence stanzas and stubby sentences. That stop. And go. Or are fragments.

> I have two daughters.
>
> They are all I ever wanted from the earth.
>
> Or almost all.
>
> I also wanted one piece of ground:
>
> One city trapped by hills. One urban river.
> An island in its element.
>
> So I could say *mine. My own.*
> And mean it.

I have immortal longings in me, you half-expect her to say, then clutch the asp and die.

Reading Louise Glück's new poems is like eavesdropping on a psychiatrist and a particularly agon-ridden, myth-spouting, shape-shifting analysand (her story could be told only by Ovid, and it wouldn't be pleasant). The discomfort in *Vita Nova*[4] is not lessened by the suspicion that the psychiatrist may also *be* the patient, that all roles may be one role to this quietly hand-wringing play-actor, the only shakes-scene in a country. Like Shakespeare, she's part-owner of her

3 *The Lost Land*, by Eavan Boland; W. W. Norton & Company, 67 pages, $21.

4 *Vita Nova*, by Louise Glück; Ecco Press, 51 pages, $22.

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own theater, and playing tonight and every night is *The True Tragedy of Louise Glück*. (Given the competition from Rita Dove's movie at the multiplex across town, you wonder how tickets are selling.)

Vita nuova was Dante's story of his love for Beatrice, love that became a faith nearly erotic—*passion* began on the cross, but now it ends in the bedroom. There are offhand references to love in Glück's *apologia pro vita sua*, but the outside world has vanished (in her last book, *Meadowlands*, there were horrifying comic dialogues with a husband, but he's been written out of the script). Instead we return to the myths of Aeneas and Dido, of Orpheus and Eurydice (in *Meadowlands* the dominating tale was the return of Odysseus; but any tale will do, as long as it makes your private tragedy public and classical). The poet is always wronged Dido, but sometimes she's also lyre-strumming Orpheus and sometimes doomed-to-hell Eurydice. It doesn't seem to matter—every role Glück chooses has its star turn.

It's hard to convey the oppressive weight of these doomed, sacrificial poems (how proud Glück is of her Freudian stigmata). Their naked interiors, bleached in disappointment and sterilized by despair, are monastic as much as masochistic. *My pain is so much more painful than yours*, each poem says in a shiver of pride.

> I believe my sin
> to be entirely common:
> the request for help
> masking request for favor
> and the plea for pity
> thinly veiling complaint.
>
> So little at peace in the spring evening,
> I pray for strength, for direction,
> but I also ask
> to survive my illness
> (the immediate one)—never mind
> anything in the future.
> I make this a special point,
> this unconcern for the future,
> also the courage I will have acquired by then
> to meet my suffering alone
> but with heightened fortitude.

Note how all those other illnesses are implied, not just to be suffered but possibly suffered still. Glück is too canny not to recognize how vain this sounds, how vengeful and unsympathetic self-pity is—when she strips away her flesh, like some vision of Vesalius, she enjoys it.

What rescues her from creepy self-indulgence (the longer the book goes on, the less it's rescued) is the saintly purity of her lines. The hollow echo of her nerveless inexorable need recognizes that no language will forgive these bitter sins or ameliorate such pain (her bloodless expression avoids the peacock chatter of Plath). Glück knows that in her Flatland world she's reduced everything to two bland dimensions—when she mentions cherries, it sounds like a psychic breakthrough.

Despite the flaws of her poetry, airless self-importance and pretension chief among them (at times you feel she's just discovered we'll all die one day, and rushed to let us know), the stark lines have the frigid emptiness of a Pinter play, everything a destructive shimmer of pronouns. She knows she's "cold at heart, in the manner of the superficial," knows her moodiness is stifling, knows she loves to stop short for the Freudian truism ("Everyone afraid of love is afraid of death") or close with the unforgiving statement: "*Bedtime*, they whisper./ *Time to begin lying*." She adores leaving the cunning pun buried there. If you wait, hungry for the textures of the world, for some noun like *pheasant* or *brick* or *rutabaga*, she'll quiver in self-satisfaction and say, "*I thought my life was over and my heart was broken./ Then I moved to Cambridge.*" It takes the whole pinch-mouthed book to make that funny.

Frieda Hughes's *Wooroloo*[5] is less a book of poetry than an act of fiction, the fiction of

5 *Wooroloo*, by Frieda Hughes; HarperCollins, 64 pages, $20.

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inherited characteristics. The children of great poets never become great poets, and even a mediocre hack has trouble passing along his tiny hoard of talent—regression to the mean is the usual, cruel inheritance of children. No Lamarck chopping off mouse tails (or Mendel counting peas) ever indulged more headily in romantic wish than those who hope literary talent can be passed from parent mouse to child mouse.

Frieda Hughes, the daughter of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath (on the jacket she's coyly described as a "writer of unusual literary pedigree"), writes big, sleepy, wallflower lines, lines mostly innocent of literary expression. She can bash out a simile whenever she wants to, but her damp clichés of feeling and blood-filled ideas act poetic for a line or two, then start faking it. She arrives at a subject and then grinds the images out like sausages.

> Hungry water has unrolled the wallpaper
> Like tongues, and the ceiling full of heavy juice
> Has fallen. The sofa floats.
>
> Oranges are planets in the fireplace,
> And the last of her son's books[,]
> Left in his old bedroom,
> Have opened like sea anemones.

Some of the images are good, many bad, most indifferent, but they overwhelm their subjects—the poor subjects are just the excuse. You can tell when Hughes has been reading her mother, when her father, though she hasn't really *read* either of them—she's just absorbed their gestures in passing. Now she adopts the fox as her familiar, now she whines at her mother for committing suicide; but Hughes wants to be a poet a lot more than she wants to write poetry.

She likes to strike a pity-me tone; yet when you get beyond her frantic image-making you find nothing but static, lifeless observation, often about carnivorous animals or frail women with psychiatric problems (her sensibility is both childish and affectless, like that of a girl raised by wolves). Hughes is a bright woman playing at writing poems, though that doesn't mean she's always terrible—she has a natural sense of the balance and weight of a line, and might in time find something to put in her lines (recall that her mother started slowly and was as contrived as an air compressor). You end up feeling some editor waited close to forty years for these half-formed, unlovely things (you can almost hear the pitch: "So the little girl grows up, see, and *she* becomes a poet!"). Frieda Hughes had the benefit of both nurture and nature, and still can't write a good poem.

Mary Jo Salter's mousy, tense, off-kilter poems disturb me more than I think they will and disappoint me more than they should. *A Kiss in Space*[6] is full of honest, dutiful poems a housewife would write, if there were such a thing as a housewife anymore; they revel in domestic certitudes, the cozy rendering of a nuclear family out of Fifties advertisements, an all-electric house with a place for everything that has a place. Sometimes it seems such fastidious, well-made poems (you can see the dust-free cupboards, the gleaming refrigerator) lack nothing but a soul.

Just when you buy that homespun complacency, she writes of watching some old movie about the sinking of the Titanic. Wife and husband and daughters are "warm beneath one blanket flung/ across a comfy sofa in/ the lifeboat of our living room" ("ever so comfy," as Auden once said) —"lifeboat" might be an unconsidered metaphor, but she notices how the movie family (also wife, husband, two children) is divided, some to live and some to die. She sees how phony it is, soon-to-be-drowned actors singing "Nearer, My God, to Thee," but it troubles her:

> Oh, you and I can laugh. But having
> turned off the set, and led the kids
> upstairs into dry beds, we sense

6 *A Kiss in Space*, by Mary Jo Salter; Alfred A. Knopf, 86 pages, $22.

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that hidden in the house a fine
crack—nothing spectacular,
only a leak somewhere—is slowly
widening to claim each of us
in random order, and we start to rock
in one another's arms.

I think she means *each other's arms*, but it's a disconcerting throwaway moment. It doesn't quite move you, and isn't quite meant to—it's "nothing spectacular" after all, just the first small sign of deaths to come.

Salter finds more in the domestic than the domestic seasonably contains—she notices the symbols daily life ignores (when she's abroad, she can't help seeing the diminished worlds the world makes—"dozens of tiny,/ tin Eiffel Towers glint at our feet"). The poems don't always come to much—you want her to have the courage of her convictions. You want her to *have* convictions. Instead you get a hostess-like sincerity, sometimes with a barely detectable sneer, a chilliness she probably doesn't even notice (that makes it slightly erotic—the erotic is the missing substance here). There's a pleasantly sour anxiety beneath this prom-dress exterior, and here and there it breaks through.

From up here, the insomniac
river turning in its bed
looks like a line somebody painted
so many years ago it's hard
to believe it was ever liquid; a motorboat
winks in the sun and leaves a wake
that seals itself in an instant, like the crack
in a hardly broken heart.

And the little straight-faced houses
that with dignity bear the twin
burdens of being unique and all alike,
and the leaf-crammed valley like the plate
of days that kept on coming and I ate
though laced with poison: I can look
over them, from this distance, with an ache
instead of a blinding pain.

Sometimes, off my guard, I half-
remember what it was to be
half-mad: whole seasons gone; the fear
a stranger in the street might ask
the time; how feigning normality
became my single, bungled task.

Feigning normality. Suddenly all that white-knuckled normalcy is explained—how lovingly she modulates from Elizabeth Bishop-like tidiness to that jarring "poison," the half-life of a half-life (that "half-" so thoughtfully enjambed). The annunciation is quiet, as so many in poetry are not. You have to work not to overlook Salter, she's so eager to *be* overlooked, to be thought garden-variety wholesome (in a hilarious poem she gives an *au pair's* bewildered view of this repressed college-town life). The good poems are few enough—there's a hardshell elegy for Louis MacNeice, not a poet who'd seem to have much to offer her, and everyday poems about a robin's nest or an injured hand that turn innocence into grounds for despair. Salter doesn't take chances, and settles too easily for well-mannered, well-manicured poems (at least she knows how to make them, in this ill-made time—but it's not enough). She gives a splendid imitation of a normal wife and mother, but under her clothes there's something unmentionable and I wish she'd let it out.

Twice last fall I tried to read Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, but its Erector Set construction and sweetly harebrained narrative kept putting me off.[7] This darkly layered original work deserves readers willing to put up with a good deal of flimflam for the pleasures of a poetry oddly conceived. Carson is a classical scholar addicted to showoff learning (I happen to like showoff learning myself). *Autobiography of Red* is a modern renovation of an obscure Greek classic that survives only in fragments, the *Geryoneis* of Stesichoros.

Geryon was a monster slain by Herakles (Hercules) for his cattle (it was the tenth of Herakles's labors). Mentioned in the *Aeneid*,

7 *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*, by Anne Carson; Alfred A. Knopf, 150 pages, $23.

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he pretty much disappears from literature after being used as a shuttle bus by Dante and Virgil in the *Inferno*. The original Geryon had three bodies and three heads, but Carson reincarnates him as a contemporary boy, a winged boy and colored red: the ultimate outsider. This "novel in verse," as the subtitle hopefully describes it, works by gestures more than incident, though the incidents are quickly told. Sexually abused by his bully of a brother, Geryon withdraws into a strange world of photographs and autobiography (which Carson's book purports to be, though the point of view is too worldly). Still a boy, he falls in love with a handsome young rough named Herakles; they visit Herakles's grandmother in her hometown of Hades and later walk the dead surface of a volcano. Herakles ends the affair. Years later, in Buenos Aires, Geryon meets Herakles by accident and falls into a destructive *ménage à trois*.

The poem straggles to an unconvincing end, without ever coming to the moment, often foretold, when Herakles must slay Geryon. What supports the rather preposterous premise is Carson's exact eye for the travails of childhood—the longings, disappointments, thwarted triumphs, and hot disasters that make childhood (even for a winged monster) both mystery religion and failed quest. The self-justifying monologues of the adults and angular dialogues between Geryon and Herakles, fraught with the tensions of the unsaid, ground a book likely to spin off into the philosophy of perception or odd facts about volcanos (I liked learning the air above volcanos can be so hot it sears the wings off birds).

Carson's ambitions are larger than her material, and her attempt to link this dysfunctional childhood to notions of "redness" or volcanos is comically strained. The adolescent homosexual love affair is touching (as Geryon's abuse is not), and you wish Carson had made more of it, as you wish she'd made more of Geryon's being a monster. The book is top-heavy with its absurd apparatus (the sort of thing classical scholars must make up as a party game)—a potted biography of Stesichoros, a "translation" of the surviving fragments of the *Geryoneis* (taking liberties with them must be her idea of a hot time), three whimsical appendices on whether Helen blinded the poet, and a bedraggled interview with him.

Carson's hokey gestures toward the "outsider," toward "identity" (Geryon has a lame "Who am I?" moment), make a little of her philosophizing go a long way—you shudder at the identity politics behind a phrase like "everyday life as a winged red person." At times *Autobiography of Red* seems like Pynchon on an off day, particularly when Geryon meets a tango dancer/psychoanalyst at the "only authentic/ tango bar left in Buenos Aires." At others, her jaunty intemperate lines go off like fireworks. Here's Herakles's granny:

> *I have it from Virginia Woolf*
> *who once spoke to me at a party not of course*
> *about drowning of which she had no idea yet*
> *—have I told you this story before?*
> *I remember the sky behind her was purple she*
> *came towards me saying* Why are you alone
> in this huge blank garden
> like a piece of electricity? *Electricity?*
> *Maybe she said cakes and tea true we were*
> *drinking gin*

Autobiography of Red shares blinding self-indulgence with any number of greater books (*The Cantos*, *Life Studies*, *Ariel*) as well as hordes of failures. Carson has found the means of her story in the blank matter of existence—any number of scraps must have come directly from her life (in roundabout commentary, perhaps, on the fragments of Stesichoros), but the classical frame allows her a distance wholly refreshing. Though the poem must be judged a failed narrative, any reader will be grateful for such failures at a time when poetry risks so little. This is a child novel born in the *Inferno*.

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Books

"A jelly minus its mould"

by Ben Downing

"The story of Coleridge's life," observed I. A. Richards in 1950, "has been told many times, in outline and at length—too often to an accompaniment of wrung hands, wry faces, set frowns, and worse." Such biographical opprobrium, tedious though it may be, is unsurprising given the rich occasions for reprimand that Coleridge provided. Plagiarism, drug abuse, deadbeat fatherhood: these are among the crimes of which he may easily be convicted, and at him an army of carping Plutarchs has thrown its books. Above all, however, Coleridge has been chided for not living up to his abilities. "What a humbling lesson to all men is Samuel Coleridge," his own brother concluded in disgust. He is a poster boy for squandered talent, a cautionary figure—in short, that awful thing, a disappointment. The pained tone taken by many of his critics is epitomized by Leslie Stephen's lugubrious summation in a lecture of 1888: "When all is said, the history, both of the man and the thinker, will always be a sad one—the saddest in some sense that we can read, for it is the history of early promise blighted and vast powers all but running hopelessly to waste."

A daunted reader sizing up the Bollingen edition of Coleridge—thirteen volumes thick and counting—might wonder what all the fuss is about. Yet a shapely and marmoreal oeuvre it isn't: fragments abound; so does weak poetry; much of the prose makes Emerson seem a model of sequacious lucidity; and a general dishevelment mars the work as a whole. Also, Coleridge notoriously penned his best verse early on, achieving in his "conversation poems" a relaxed felicity, and in "Kubla Khan" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" an altitude of imagination, that he couldn't sustain. Nor did his habit of projecting impossibly grand opuses—he once indulged the Borgesian fantasy of writing "300 volumes," allowing ten years for each—help deflate expectations. As Coleridge himself admitted, "the Number of [my] unrealized schemes, and the Mass of my miscellaneous fragments, have often furnished my friends with a Subject of Raillery, and sometimes Regret and Reproof."

The chief reason Coleridge provokes dismay is that he was, as Stephen's "vast powers" suggests, by common consent a genius of the first magnitude; in terms of sheer I.Q., he has few literary rivals. Another point of consensus is that his brilliance flashed out most dazzlingly in his talk. His phosphorescent monologues have been variously compared to waves, rivers, auroras, even the Milky Way; an American auditor swore he'd heard nothing to match him since Niagara Falls. Like Johnson and Wilde, he is the representative windbag of his generation. Unlike those endlessly quotable worthies, however, Coleridge has been survived by few of his own remarks, which somehow frustrated would-be stenographers, refusing to harden for posterity into

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immortal minutes. So there sprang up a waggish tradition, from Peacock to Beerbohm, of mocking the style of his prolixity, but none of preserving its contents. No full Boswell treatment for Coleridge, then—his biographers have had to settle for indicating the fact of his *cacoethes loquendi*. What we get is the impression of a man who, in the excellent poolhall phrase, too rarely stopped talking and started chalking.

If even Coleridge's prodigious gift of gab can come to seem less a glory than a symptom, what hope is there for an end to the wrung hands and set frowns, to the slide of biography toward pathography, to the sad sense of vast powers hemorrhaging? Oddly enough, it was Stephen himself who pointed a way out of this impasse when he speculated that "a Life of Coleridge may still be put together by some judicious writer . . . which should in turn remind us of Augustine, of Montaigne, and of Rousseau, and sometimes, too, of the inimitable Pepys." Stephen calls, in short, for Coleridge to be placed among the great self-disclosers; and his daughter, Mrs. Woolf, seemed to pick up on her father's hint when she wrote, "In proportion as he became incapable of action, he became capable of feeling. . . . To confess, to analyse, to describe was the only alleviation of his appalling torture." The ideal biographer of Coleridge, perhaps, will present him not as a Goethe manqué but on his own peculiar terms, his life a baroque inward turbulence to marvel at rather than an outward botch to bemoan.

Richard Holmes started writing biographies at an age by which many of us scarcely have bothered to read one. His six-hundred-page, prize-winning life of Shelley came out when Holmes was all of twenty-nine, and his fascination with biography began at least a decade earlier: at nineteen he set out astride a donkey to retrace the path of R. L. Stevenson through the Cevennes. Where most biographers stray into the art, Holmes clearly was born to it.

Shelley: The Pursuit (1974) opens with a brusque, almost pugnacious caveat: "There will always be Shelley lovers, but this book is not for them. The angel they seek can be found in the golden reminiscences of Trelawny, or the charming romance by André Maurois." The Shelley who emerges from his study bears less resemblance to Ariel, as Maurois styled him, than to Charles Manson—a vain, shrill, mutinous, often hysterical aspiring guru who drifted around Europe with his flock of young women, leaving a trail of dead babies (and a drowned ex-wife) behind him.

Holmes's next book, *Footsteps* (1985), is splendidly *sui generis*. A blend of straight biography, rumination on the form, and autobiography, it relates how the aptly surnamed Holmes sleuthed after, in succession, Stevenson, Mary Wollstonecraft, Shelley, and Gérard de Nerval. If the book sounds self-congratulatory, it isn't. In fact, the final section ends with Holmes's acknowledgement that the life of Nerval he wrote was "a confused production [which] wisely no publisher ever touched." In the Shelley essay, meanwhile, Holmes repudiates one of his own bold claims (about the parentage of a short-lived child). These admissions of bungling and fallibility, far from sapping our respect, draw us into the biographer's laboratory. Intimate, congenial, and above all fired by a bright love for its medium, *Footsteps* makes biography seem less an affair of archival drudgery than one of travel, feeling, instinct, art.

In 1989 Holmes's *Coleridge: Early Visions* was published. Now reissued in paper,[1] it sees Coleridge through the first half of his life, a period whose highlights include his harebrained utopian scheme called Pantisocracy, his flirtation with Jacobin journalism, his *Wanderjahr* in Germany, and the most fruitful period of his friendship and collaboration with Wordsworth. Here, Holmes developed the format he's been using ever since: long, almost symphonic chapters divided into many sections, and these into short paragraphs—piddling details

1 *Coleridge: Early Visions, 1772–1804*, by Richard Holmes; Pantheon Books, 432 pages, $17 paper.

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on the surface of it, but in fact they represent the structural aspect of Holmes's whole approach, which is constantly to pivot and shift point of view, darting in on his quarry from a number of angles rather than belaboring a single line of inquiry.

Holmes described his next book, *Dr. Johnson and Mr. Savage* (1993), as an experiment in "microbiography," since it focuses on the short, obscure relationship between the young Johnson, still a raw hack new to London, and the churlish, disreputable, ultimately homicidal Richard Savage. It is a Houdiniesque demonstration of just how much Holmes, his hands tied by the dearth of evidence, can conjure up by sheer application and perspicacity.

In my view, Holmes is quite simply the best literary biographer now active in English. Why? As I've already suggested, he is charmingly familiar, never censorious, and unafraid to leap and, occasionally, fall flat. Each of his books is not simply a faithful record of its subject but an exploration of biographical form itself. Holmes also seems drawn to his subjects by uncommonly powerful affinities. He is attracted to characters who are by nature restless, nomadic, in extremis, and European rather than insular in their leanings. (The relationship of English writers to the Continent is one of his significant themes). A keen sense of poignancy sharpens everything he writes. And bringing it all together is a perfectly adapted prose style, supple and clear yet capable of fine lyric bursts. Owing to these qualities, Holmes's books have little in common with the hulking compendia of inert facts we've come to expect and, too often, accept. The longueurs drearily endemic to most biographies are quite absent from his.

Multi-part biographies exasperate. Left hanging, the reader is first tormented with impatient curiosity and then, by the time the next volume appears, galled to discover how much he's forgotten of the previous. Not even so fine a writer as Richard Holmes can surmount this difficulty, but he has eased it by concluding *Early Visions* with Coleridge poised on the cusp of perilous adventure. The image of the poet settled at twilight aboard the Malta-bound merchantship *Speedwell*, a rudder-case serving for his desk and—the clinching detail, this—coops full of quacking ducks at his feet, stayed vividly with me for the interim between volumes.

Darker Reflections[2] picks up virtually the next moment. It is April 9, 1804, and Coleridge is under sail. The first long chapter of the book, which covers his more-than-two-year Mediterranean sojourn, plays out like a brisk historical novel. Mustering his considerable charm, Coleridge soon endears himself to, and finagles employment with, the Maltese governor, Sir Alexander Ball. During a sidetrip to Sicily, he gets embroiled in a potentially explosive diplomatic incident, but comports himself with unexpected sangfroid. For much of 1805 the doped-up poet is, of all things, the acting public secretary of Malta and the chum of naval heroes like Captain Stephen "Our Country Right or Wrong" Decatur. Nelson's death finds him in Naples; there is a moving description here of the city's Englishmen openly weeping and embracing in the streets. Coleridge next surfaces in Rome, where he falls in with, among others, the German writer Johann Ludwig Tieck and the American painter Washington Allston. As Napoleon's armies sweep down through Italy, Coleridge—later boasting that the emperor had issued a personal warrant for his arrest, and that the pope had abetted his escape—slips back to England in August 1806.

Coleridge's peregrinations continued fitfully for the next decade, but henceforth he ricocheted only within a tight triangle described by London, the West Country, and the Lake District. As his itineracy attests, these years were, by and large, desperate, punishing ones for Coleridge; that he survived them at all, unclaimed by overdose or

2 *Coleridge: Darker Reflections, 1804–1834*, by Richard Holmes; Pantheon Books, 640 pages, $30.

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suicide (an abdication he often pondered), is astonishing.

To begin, his wretched love life. One way to summarize Coleridge's amorous dilemma is to say that he was Southey's brother-in-law but wanted to be Wordsworth's; another, that he married the wrong Sara. Before leaving for Malta, he had conceived a passion for Wordsworth's sister-in-law, Sara Hutchinson, whose name Coleridge anagrammatized to Asra. While the infatuation seems never to have gone beyond mawkish caresses, it haunted him for the rest of his days. Worse still, his anguish over Asra was bound up with his jealousy of Wordsworth, who, not unlike a more wholesome Shelley, seemed to glide through life in a cozy penumbra of feminine solicitude. To the needy, sentimental Coleridge, nothing could have looked more paradisal. His fondest wish was to crash the Wordsworthian group hug.

The resulting erotic tension came to a head around Christmas 1806, when Coleridge saw—or, more probably, hallucinated—Asra in bed with his fellow bard. The thought of one's sweetheart being lustily rogered by William Wordsworth cannot be pleasant, yet somehow Coleridge fought it down. A far more serious rupture occurred in 1810 when Wordsworth apparently warned off one of Coleridge's prospective babysitters. Irate and wounded, Coleridge badmouthed Wordsworth all over London. The Cumbrian sallied forth to quash these calumnies, and there ensued a farcically stubborn showdown during which the two poets communicated only through third parties. At last a truce of sorts was hammered out, but the old camaraderie had been ruined; except for a shared return to Germany in 1828, they scarcely saw each other thereafter. What a curious pair they make: Wordsworth flinty, decisive, imperturbable, forging steadily ahead; Coleridge a creature of panics, dawdlings, and velleities, always "veering about from one hope to another," as Lamb put it. That they fell out is less surprising than that they ever got on.

Equally un-Wordsworthian and volatile were Coleridge's literary activities during these years. Verse in general was the wrong outlet for his discursive energies; prose proved a more elastic medium. His first major venture was *The Friend*, a one-man periodical cranked out over ten months in 1809–10. A mishmash of his various preoccupations, *The Friend* was classic Coleridgean fare. "Many issues ended with an unfinished sentence . . . and many footnotes (often containing poetry) threatened to engulf the main text," comments Holmes. Financially the paper was, small surprise, a disaster; even Coleridge acknowledged "my Don Quixotism in expecting that the public will ever pretend to understand my lucubrations." His next foray into journalism, in 1811, more remuneratively catered to the ruck: a series of ninety-one leaders written for the *Courier*, many of them anti-Bonapartist. "Much of it was frankly little more than wartime propaganda," writes Holmes. "Coleridge's resort to patriotic journalism . . . probably did more damage to his contemporary reputation than anything else he ever wrote." (His erstwhile friend Hazlitt, a lifelong radical and admirer of Napoleon, blasted Coleridge for his apostasy and became thereafter his personal gadfly.) Conversely, *Biographia Literaria*, which he cobbled together in 1815, did much to raise his posthumous stock, especially among the New Critics.

However, it was neither as poet nor prose writer that Coleridge found his widest audience, but as playwright and lecturer. His play *Osorio*, rejected by Sheridan in 1797, was reborn in 1813 as *Remorse* and became a Drury Lane hit; together with his journalism and lectures, it boosted him briefly to the status of, in Holmes's words, "a recognized 'lion' of Regency London." As for the lectures, which touched on everyone from Shakespeare to Schlegel, the first series of them, arranged by Sir Humphry Davy, was held at the Royal Society in 1808. Many performances went swimmingly, and Coleridge did his waterfall imitation on and off for years. But there were, predictably, debacles. De Quincey reports of one early

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oration that, "His lips were baked with feverish heat, and often black in colour; and . . . he often seemed to labour under an almost paralytic inability to raise the upper jaw from the lower."

As fellow imbiber De Quincey's ghoulish description points up, opium threw spanners into every work. To take just one instance of the havoc it wrought on Coleridge's career, he once promised to write for the *Courier*, over a single weekend, two long essays, duly touted on the front page that Friday. And next? "Coleridge took a deep breath, opened his laudanum decanter, and collapsed. None of the essays was ever delivered." Parched lips were the least of the physical consequences. Reading *Darker Reflections*, you will learn more than you probably wanted to know about the gastrointestinal embarrassments visited on the average nineteenth-century junky. The enema in particular looms large. That Coleridge, with his chronic verbal dysentery, should often have become costive is an obvious but irresistible irony.

The course of Coleridge's addiction was more serpentine, less a long unbroken fall, than Stephen's "running hopelessly to waste" implies. "Obstinate in resurrection," he time and again bestirred himself from the depths of narcosis to launch forth on some fresh argosy; there is a pattern of sorts to his sudden ignominious plunges and slow resurfacings. The worst overdose occurred in 1813, when he bottomed out in a Bath inn and might have died but for a magnanimous doctor, Caleb Parry, who took him under his wing, and a friend, Josiah Wade, who patiently nursed him back to health in Bristol.

In fact, this was only one of many times when Coleridge's life was buoyed, and quite possibly saved, by the kindness of both strangers and kin. "Remarkable men find remarkable conveniences," Henry James aphorizes in "The Coxon Fund," his *nouvelle à clef* about Coleridge. Like James himself, Coleridge dictated much of his later prose, and he had a knack for recruiting unpaid amanuenses. He was lucky to find generous bankrollers in the Wedgwood family and De Quincey; in his longsuffering wife a paragon of patience; and in Southey a substitute father. Coleridge had, in Holmes's crisp phrase, "cuckoo-like propensities," and a sixth sense for free shelter; he was a sort of professional houseguest. The first of his adoptive families, the easygoing Morgans, sporadically coddled him in various homes from 1807 until 1816. (One is reminded here of Johnson and the Thrales.) But an ingrate sponge Coleridge wasn't. When the Morgans ran into dire financial troubles, he rode loyally to the rescue and helped them dig out. "He took whatever came," notes James, "but he never plotted for it, and no man who was so much of an absorbent can ever have been so little of a parasite."

When in 1816 Coleridge came under the protection of his final and most effective savior, Dr. James Gillman, it marked not only the end of his worst opium ravages but also the beginning of his relatively halcyon last phase. Typically, Coleridge started off a patient and wound up the family pet, living with the Gillmans until his death in 1834. (Swinburne rounded out his days in a similar fashion.) About opium addiction Gillman was eminently shrewd: rather than trying to wean Coleridge outright, he let him take small doses and sneak a few drams on the side. In a quintessential Coleridgean moment, a friend once met him stealthily scoring laudanum at his chemist while Byron's funeral cortège—the 1820s equivalent of Princess Diana's—went by. Coleridge delivered an elaborate impromptu eulogy.

Under Gillman's care, Coleridge mellowed into his valedictory incarnation as the Sage of Highgate: the avuncular, somewhat dotty figure who famously strolled the Heath with Keats and, in only two miles, "broached a thousand things"; the object of pilgrimages by Mill, Carlyle, and Emerson. He wrote little new yet published much old—to scant profit, alas, being far less blessed in his publishers than his doctors. Other woes included the relentless brickbats of Hazlitt—who once, having seen Coleridge's *Lay Sermon* advertised, savagely re-

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viewed it before it was even written—and the dismissal from his Oxford fellowship of his son Hartley. But for the most part Coleridge goes out in, if not quite triumph, something surprisingly like peace.

Crabb Robinson recorded in his diaries that one day Lamb

> corrected me not angrily, but as if really pained by the expression "poor Coleridge" I accidentally made use of. "He is a fine fellow, in spite of all his faults and weaknesses. Call him Coleridge—I hate 'poor Coleridge.' I can't bear to hear pity applied to such a one."

Neither can Richard Holmes. More than in high regard, Holmes holds him in a kind of awe—an amazement at his omnivorous intellect and phoenix-like perseverance. Although far from blind to Coleridge's foolishness, absurdities, and penchant for humbug—a light vein of Stracheyesque comedy burbles through the book—Holmes is deeply respectful, even affectionate, toward his addled charge.

Perhaps the most striking technical feature of this second volume is the use Holmes makes of Coleridge's often wincingly naked notebooks, in and out of which he weaves with masterful fluidity; if all good biographies are feats of nimble synthesis, this one is exceptionally so. To say that Holmes perfectly fits Stephen's bill for a "judicious writer" might seem procrustean, but the effect of his deft quotation—an undervalued art—and acute commentary thereon truly is to set Coleridge in, or at least adjacent to, the company of Augustine and the rest. Guided by the notebooks and his own alertness to nuances of feeling, Holmes penetrates the murky tumult of Coleridge's inner life and minutely chronicles the war he waged there with himself. This struggle becomes, in Holmes's account of it, the central drama of the book.

To what degree Coleridge's addiction should be stressed is among the crucial choices any biographer of him must make, and Holmes, it seems to me, has gotten it exactly right. While never slighting the anguish of dependence, he does not treat it as a separate or adventitious phenomenon, but always as part of a whole web of disturbances. Coleridge's textual kleptomania Holmes similarly refuses to isolate or condemn. The purloined profundities are, to Holmes, less revealing of his underhanded ways than of his loneliness, which he sought to ease by holding "endless, sometimes desperate, 'night-conversations' with his fellow authors." Also in Coleridge's partial defense, Holmes points out how widespread at the time was the habit of furtive borrowing. Victims included Coleridge himself, who saw choice bits of "Christabel" brazenly filched by Sir Walter Scott yet never complained. Finally, Holmes argues that much of what was stolen was transformed and even improved—"Coleridge plagiarized, but no one plagiarized like Coleridge." Is Holmes too apologetic here? Those determined to take a hard line on the matter will no doubt think so, but I, for one, find his unrighteous views sensible.

Where I often part ways with Holmes is over Coleridge's original work, which he too eagerly praises. Time and again he salutes the cerebrations as "brilliant," the poems as "beautiful" or "haunting." These they intermittently are, I agree, but more often other adjectives come to mind, such as "woolly," "turgid," and "diffuse." "Genius tends to be careless in its strength. Genius is, by the nature of it, always in rather a hurry. Genius can't be bothered about perfection." Beerbohm's grumble—made apropos of Strachey, whom he compliments for *not* having it—applies damningly to Coleridge and sums up my misgivings about him.

I have a second, related cavil. As in *Early Visions*, Holmes in his footnotes maintains a running commentary on, among other things, Coleridge's posthumous influence. Often these excurses are persuasive and enlightening, but sometimes Holmes falls prey to overzealous *post hoc ergo propter hoc* reasoning. For example, Coleridge's dictum that "Every man is born an Aristotelian, or a Platonist" Holmes hails as "a seminal con-

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cept" and an example of Coleridge's "bequest of ideas to posterity." The evidence? To Holmes, it seems, any latter-day pundit who proposes to split the world between one type of cove and another necessarily follows in the great man's wake. Yet surely Coleridge wasn't the first thus to halve mankind; surely such broad dichotomies are too general for any one person to claim. A touch of Coleridgean overkill here.

The above trifling blemishes aside, *Darker Reflections* brings to completion one of the superior biographies of our age. These two volumes are, if nothing else, unsurpassed in their concinnity: Holmes knows just what to put where and just how far he can digress without losing the main thread. That such structural punctiliousness has been lavished on one of our messiest, most discombobulated men of letters—"He was like a jelly minus its mould, he had to be embanked" (James yet again)—goes to the root of biographical irony and paradox. For he who writes another's life imposes on it an order, and perhaps even a meaning, that its liver never knew.

Life rarely acted on Coleridge in a way that was, to use his own neologism, "esemplastic," which is to say unifying. He famously claimed that "Kubla Khan" had been interrupted by "a person from Porlock." Another poem, "The Lime Tree Bower My Prison," finds him unable to hike with his friends because of having "met with an accident." Even his best-known phrase, "the willing suspension of disbelief," smacks of abrupt severance. He represents, in part, the poet as lame duck. There's something terminally naïve about him, something almost of the idiot savant.

But was Coleridge in any significant sense a "failure"? While the enduring prestige accorded his finest work seems to refute the notion, there clings to him, like stale hookah-smoke, a Delmore Schwartzian whiff of thwarted potential and defeat. Doubtless a clean-living Coleridge would have accomplished more than he did, but I wonder how much. He was dreamy, restless, dithering, erratic, and centrifugal long before laudanum made him more so. Coleridge reports of the waylaid Wedding-Guest that "The Mariner hath his will," and many concluded that his own had been hijacked, perhaps prenatally. "His cardinal sin is that he wants will. He has no resolution." Thus Carlyle. "His mouth was gross, voluptuous, open, eloquent; his chin good-humoured and round; but his nose, the rudder of the face, the index of the will, was small, feeble, nothing—like what he has done." So, with his usual graciousness, physiognomized Hazlitt.

To me all this weighs in Coleridge's favor. For a congenitally high-strung, weak-willed fantasist, he did rather well for himself. The tendency to see him as an illustration of Cyril Connolly's maxim "Whom the gods wish to destroy, they first call promising," to peg him as a tragic archetype, is off the mark. Pace Stephen, who as editor of the *DNB* was in a good position to judge, I disagree that Coleridge's is the saddest history; I can think of dozens of writers whose lives I'd rather not lead, and as many whose stories are far more wrenching to read. Factored into Stephen's gloomy calculus, I suspect, is the Victorian horror of wasted steampower. If Coleridge fribbled away much of his copious vapor on talk and Teutonic chimeras, well, what of it? Such was his dispersive temperament. Better to have a gross, voluptuous mouth and feeble nose than a pinched frown and hands grown chafed from wringing.

A working life

Lawrence Lipking Samuel Johnson: The Life of an Author
Harvard, 372 pages, $35

reviewed by Claude Rawson

Lawrence Lipking's *Samuel Johnson* is not a conventional birth-to-death biography. It is entirely focused on the writings. "The Life of an Author," in this sense, is one in which

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biographical narration aids an understanding of the author's works, and which "passes over details that do not shed light on the work." It opens not with Johnson's birth, but with the famous letter to Chesterfield, written in 1755 when Johnson was in his forties. The great earl, having neglected the struggling lexicographer who looked to him for patronage, was now conferring some preeningly unctuous approval on the author of the completed *Dictionary*, which was about to appear and which he had not yet seen. Chesterfield hailed Johnson as a commanding linguistic authority, indeed as a "dictator" to whom he surrendered "all my rights and privileges in the English language, as a free-born British subject," but not without establishing his advantage over Johnson in point of politeness and caste. His judgment is delivered in that nicest possible way, which consists of making a more or less subtle and not altogether covert sting appear as somehow inseparable from a generously vouchsafed compliment. The (anonymous but unmistakable) earl had "a greater opinion of [Johnson's] impartiality and severity as a judge, than of his gallantry as a fine gentleman." Johnson was deficient in "politeness."

Johnson replied, in a letter which was not published but which became the subject of hot gossip, that (in a text he dictated many years later) Chesterfield's accolade was a little late. Had it come when it was needed, it would have "been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent and cannot enjoy it, till I am solitary and cannot impart it, till I am known and do not want it." It is textbook Johnson, the master of the pulverizing retort. We do not have the text that Chesterfield saw, and the reply got all the mythologizing that goes with oral tradition, a tradition orchestrated by its author, and (who knows) perhaps even adorned at the edges by an embroidery of added pointedness or some wishful afterthought. Talkers for victory like Johnson must be especially vulnerable to the temptations of the *esprit d'escalier*. If the retort, complete with its procession of triplets and thundering closure, bears the mark of Johnson's best triumphalist conversation, that too has come down to us, through Boswell and others, in a crafted state. Still, one witness told Boswell "he was confident from memory" that the original letter was more, not less, pointed "than in the copy which he dictated many years after it was written."

The reply has also been mythologized as signaling the death of patronage and ushering in an era of independent authorship responsible to commercial forces. The publisher Dodsley, who had a stake in the *Dictionary*, "regretted the falling-out, which he thought bad for business," but, as Lipking suggests, "Johnson's instinct for business may have been sounder." By making sure word of his letter got round, and not actually publishing it, "he set off a public buzz that would sell many books." But Lipking points out that the situation of which Johnson's letter is supposed to be the inaugural expression was already to some extent in existence. It is also a fact (as some recent scholarship suggests) that reports of the death of patronage, or for that matter of Johnson's much asserted repudiation of patrons (he accepted a pension seven years later), have been greatly exaggerated, though his personal bitterness towards Chesterfield is clear. The historical situation was as usual more complex than the mythology, and what Chesterfield's puff of the *Dictionary* boiled down to was not the demise of the patron but a local eruption of patronizing.

A marginal epiphenomenon that Lipking touches on, but I think too briefly, is the probability that Johnson might have been stung by precisely the slur on his politeness which Chesterfield signaled when he said Johnson was more of an impartial judge than a gallant gentleman. Putdowns impugning caste were powerful weapons in the eighteenth-century armory of point-scoring and created a shadow world of notional social ranking that had in many contexts as powerful an existence as that of formal distinctions of rank. The "dissertation" on high people and low people in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* or the contests of uppishness

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among servants in his novels are a comic demonstration of the passionate pedantry which animated the practices of social competitiveness among all gradations of rank, and a rich variety of real-life examples is on display in the writings of the period.

Johnson freely admitted that "I can hardly tell who was my own grandfather," but Boswell's *Life* offers much testimony that Johnson "liked to be sometimes taken out of the class of literary men, and to be merely genteel—*un gentilhomme comme un autre*"—an affectation common in authors of the period (Voltaire, in the *Lettres philosophiques*, contemptuously noted it in Congreve), and, according to Ford Madox Ford, rife among English, but not French, writers of all periods. Whatever his own private feelings, Johnson, commenting on Voltaire's anecdote in the *Life of Congreve*, professed to share Voltaire's opinion of Congreve's "despicable foppery," a measure of the awkward volatility with which this preoccupation exercised its influence even on strongly defined personalities. It is perhaps the single issue in eighteenth-century social relations on which simple consistency is least to be expected. When Johnson was once asked to compose a funeral sermon, he "naturally inquired into the character of the deceased; and being told she was remarkable for her humility and condescension to her inferiours, he observed, that those were very laudable qualities, but it might not be easy to discover who the lady's inferiours were."

When not enraged against Chesterfield, Johnson in later years praised Chesterfield's controversial and posthumously published *Letters* as a mainly excellent guide to manners: "Take out the immorality, and it should be put in the hands of every young gentleman." The immorality in question was Chesterfield's recommendation of adultery with polite older women in order to improve his son's quantum of urbanity, the quality Chesterfield liked to refer to as "the graces." Johnson also said, "Every man of any education would rather be called a rascal, than accused of deficiency in *the graces*," a clear indication of how Chesterfield's taunt about his own lack of "gallantry as a fine gentleman" was likely to strike him. And when, in his most famous comment on Chesterfield's *Letters*, he said they "taught the morals of a whore, and the manners of a dancing master," he was putting Chesterfield down by the very criteria of politeness and caste which Chesterfield had applied to him. That this was done in the reverse direction to that of the two men's formal social rank, *de bas en haut* so to speak, is an index of the freestanding nature of such social ploys, often seemingly independent of the actual rank of the interlocutors. A deep residual attachment to a notional hierarchy is being expressed even as the social reality of the existing hierarchy is sidestepped or defied.

Lipking aptly quotes Johnson's view, both admiring and affronted, that "Chesterfield was the politest man he ever knew, but 'indeed he did not think it worth his while to treat me like a Gentleman.'" He rightly rejects the simple mythologies about patronage which are persistently attached to Johnson's letter to Chesterfield, and correctly, in my view, stresses that Johnson's purported attack on patronage takes second place to his resentment of Chesterfield's neglect in Johnson's hour of need. It is not clear to me how much relative importance Lipking attaches to Johnson's wounded social sensibilities. But his "close" readings of the text of the letter don't really throw light on nuances of social tone, and are in fact a slightly wooden interlude in an otherwise suggestive and intellectually elegant discussion. It is one of a few examples of doggedly self-enclosed verbal exposition which smack more of the classroom than of the living world.

After this useful opening, the book moves on to a more or less chronological discussion of Johnson's writings, concerned, as in the opening chapter, to challenge or refine hindsight mythologies of Johnson's career, and especially the antithetic scenarios of "the self-made author and the passive instrument of print culture."

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Lipking seeks to convey the actual feel of the years of struggle, their uncertainties and setbacks, and the stamp of personality: restless ambition, in particular, and a "preemptive dejection" visible in Johnson's writings long before the formal claims of having learned through experience the vanity of human wishes.

"Preemptive dejection" is a telling phrase, finely capturing an anxious restlessness of mind that not only anticipates disappointment but also is given to experiencing it in advance, partly as an antidote or preparation for experiencing it in due time. The most literal application of this phrase is to the early writings. But it is also vividly applicable to *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749), Johnson's greatest poem, to which Lipking devotes an eloquent chapter. The chapter's title, "Preferment's Gate," is a phrase from the poem, and obviously evocative of the theme of "ambition." But the opening of the poem offers perhaps the most concise and comprehensive illustration of "preemptive dejection" in Johnson's works. This is not merely because it's the opening of a dejected poem, but because it established *ab initio*, as a psychological donnée evidently applicable to all humans at all times, the sheer unsatisfiability of human desire, its point being not that wishes can't be granted, but that even when they are granted the result either isn't worth having or at best generates new wishes *ad infinitum*.

This, in a sense, is the theme of the whole poem, making the "vanity" independent of circumstantial or behavioral improvement, and resting the case on a universal psychological infirmity rather than on moral deficiencies. That Johnson gave this particular spin to his Juvenalian original, defining the problem as one of apparently innate mental constitution rather than of selective human depravity or life's wide-ranging bloody-mindedness, is evident throughout the poem. But the opening portrayal of "wav'ring man," deluded by "treach'rous phantoms," shunning ills that are merely "fancied," and chasing a "good" that is "airy" and insubstantial, is massively "preemptive" in its implication that the heavy expenditure of both anxiety and aspiration is a tormented shadow-boxing, foredoomed to failure.

This view of the human condition as wholly determined by psychological factors, a congenital or radical disposition of the human mind, is a perception comparable to Swift's, without the guilt-inducing charge carried by Swift's satire. (It has more than once been pointed out that Johnson's writings offer all the raw materials for satire without the satire itself, withholding the latter through a blend of compassionate sympathy and of literal-minded shrinking from the distortions of irony). In a climate of thought tenuously accustomed to the idea of a psychiatric cure, the predicament described by both authors will seem especially resistant to resolution. Their perception of the human lot is offered as more or less axiomatic and definitional. And, as also in Swift, whom Johnson temperamentally resembled and therefore disliked, Johnson's sense of the universality of a phenomenon turns with unblinking logic to a pained self-implication. The poignancy of the dismal lapidary pronouncements of the *Vanity*'s opening lines is sharpened by our knowledge of how pressing, in practice, irrational fears were to Johnson throughout his life, and how attached he was to the idea that delusive hopes are better than no hope at all. Hope, even in "airy" good, is promoted, in all Johnson's moral and introspective writings, as a necessary practical therapy, which sees us through any given present moment, but is by definition doomed to defeat the state of mind that sustains it. There is a stark pathos in the clear-eyed recognition of, and unposturing submission to, this.

These preoccupations run through Johnson's periodical essays, especially the *Rambler*, and through *Rasselas*. The latter is a particularly systematic fictional treatment, in a cumulative series of discrete parables, of the "vanity" of pursuing "airy" good and shunning fancied ills, and of the perpetually

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unsatisfied "hunger" of the human imagination. Johnson's psychological probings on the subject of dejection, solitude and the therapies of quotidian self-management are well brought out at scattered points in Lipking's discussion of these writings. He has partially structured his account of Johnson's character round the perception of a governing temperamental pattern of ambition and anxiety, and he gives some (though perhaps not enough) attention to Johnson's complex sensibilities on the subject of social rank.

As a rounded interpretation of Johnson's personality, however, the work is impeded by the self-imposed obligations of the kind of "biography" Lipking has set out to write. His justifiable concern to focus exclusively on Johnson's writings commits him to a panoramic, and necessarily miscellaneous, analysis of the various subjects of the periodical essays, of the characteristics of Johnson's fiction and his fiction theories, and, in due course, of his views on drama, his play *Irene*, his edition of Shakespeare, his political writings, the *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, and the *Lives of the Poets*.

The book offers attractive accounts of most of these texts and topics, well-written, well-informed, and readable. The theme of anxiety and "psychological crisis" is never lost sight of, even when the dejection is no longer "preemptive" in Lipking's first and most basic sense, but appears late in life. But although the interpretative thread it provides is visible throughout, it never quite acquires the status of an informing principle, and this very estimable study does not come over as a sustained reinterpretation of its subject. Nor is it the sort of biography which provides either a full narrative of its subject's career, or a more introductory account of the kind you would look up for quick access to a basic range of factual information: if you wanted to discover from it the chief dates of Johnson's career, for example, you would have to search hard and probably experience some disappointment. In the last analysis, this is a critical introduction to the works, not a "life" in any real sense, and it will take its place among several others of its kind, better written than most, attractive to read, seldom wrong-headed, and not, for all its wisdom and good sense, containing many surprises.

Abhorring a vacuum

Park Honan Shakespeare: A Life. Oxford University Press, 460 pages, $35

reviewed by Paul Dean

"Shakespeare led a life of Allegory: his works are the comments on it." Keats's remark has licensed too much irresponsible speculation and novelettish embroidery masquerading as biography. E. K. Chambers and Samuel Schoenbaum are the major exceptions to this statement, although neither is immune from the odd flight of fancy. Chambers called his book of 1930 *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, and if the factual deposit has grown imperceptibly since then, so have the problems. Schoenbaum never wrote a formal biography, but his scrupulous commentary on the documents, *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (1975), makes a telling contrast to the lunacies of biographers which he charted so entertainingly in *Shakespeare's Lives* (1970, revised 1991). Park Honan certainly can't be accused of sensationalism; he moves at a stately pace through the chronological sequence of events, and is willing to let the record speak for itself, even to the extent of being dry.

That legendary postcard on which all we know about Shakespeare can be written must now be at least A4 size; new information is always liable to turn up—for example, the exact locations of the 107 acres of land he bought in 1602 came to light only in 1994. Yet Honan, no less than Keats, combs the life for clues to the works, and vice versa: how that person could have written those plays and poems remains an insoluble enigma. There is no doubt, however, that he did. Honan is not so wickedly mocking of the anti-Stratfordians as Jonathan Bate

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—about whose stimulating book *The Genius of Shakespeare* (1997) he is unfairly haughty—but he routs them as comprehensively.

Like all his predecessors, Honan is fairly confident of the story up to about 1580. He is informative about Stratford, slow to break with its medieval past and reacting to the Reformation with a kind of wary acceptance, and about Shakespeare's parents, giving us a fuller picture than usual of John Shakespeare, by inheritance a farmer, by trade a glover, illicitly a dealer in wool and a money-lender, whose deteriorating circumstances are carefully detailed. Honan can take for granted that William went to the grammar school at Stratford, because there was nowhere else for him to go and because his works show that he had followed the Elizabethan national curriculum. The normal school-leaving age was fifteen or sixteen, although we do not know that he stayed that long; one tradition has him leaving earlier to help his father. William married the pregnant Anne Hathaway of Shottery in 1582; they had three children, Susannah (b. 1583), and twins, Judith and Hamnet (b. 1585). So far, so good. Then Honan opens Part II, "Actor and Poet of the London Stage," with discussions of Elizabethan London, its theatres, their troupes and repertoires. Where was Shakespeare in all this? "For a few years he is not traceable in our records," probably because he was a jobbing actor rather than a shareholder who would be included in a cast list.

Scholars exceed even Nature in their abhorrence of a vacuum, and the most determined attempt to fill this one was made by E. A. J. Honigmann in his book *Shakespeare: The "Lost Years"* (1985), which has just been reissued with a new preface. He believes that, after leaving school, Shakespeare was employed as a tutor in the household of the Hoghtons, a prominent Catholic family in Lancashire, who then recommended him to connections in London. (The fact that their resident "player" was called William Shakeshaft is not as weighty as it seems; Shakespeare's grandfather had been known as Richard Shakstaff. Names were variable.) Honigmann's evidence was taken up and developed by Eric Sams in *The Real Shakespeare: Retrieving the Early Years, 1564–1594* (1995). Honan rehearses Honigmann's arguments, but is unpersuaded, and does not mention Sams's book at all, which is unfair, for although Sams is impolite, it is equally so to ignore him.

A major reason for this reluctance to accept Honigmann's case is obvious, but rarely admitted: the implication that Shakespeare was a Catholic outrages those—Erastians one and all—who are committed to a view of him as guardian of the national cultural heritage. He is a product of the Renaissance (or the Reformation—it's all the same to them), the great poet of the Elizabethan settlement; how can he have been a *Catholic*?

We cannot say for certain that he was; the emerging historical evidence, particularly from local records, has made us ever more aware of the coexistence of Catholics and Anglicans in many parishes for long after the Henrician reforming legislation and even after the Elizabethan Settlement. But we cannot deny that Shakespeare moved in Catholic circles. Consider the following circumstantial evidence, all to be found in Honan's book. Rowington, a village to the north of Stratford, "a hive of Catholics," was also the "home of more sixteenth-century Shakespeares than any other Warwickshire parish" and the likely place of origin of the poet's paternal grandfather, Richard. Shakespeare's father's "spiritual testament," made in the 1580s, is now accepted as genuine; it is a vigorously Catholic document. John Shakespeare was cited for non-attendance at church in 1592, giving as his reason the wish to avoid his creditors, a reason which Honigmann, Sams, and Honan all agree to be improbable. Shakespeare's maternal grandfather was a staunch Catholic who raised his daughter accordingly and would have been most unlikely to allow her to marry a Protestant. At the grammar school, Shakespeare was taught first by Simon Hunt, who may be the per-

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son of that name who later left Stratford for Douai and became a Jesuit; then by Thomas Jenkins, whose father was in the service of a Catholic nobleman; then by John Cottom, whose brother was a Catholic priest and martyr. The Cottoms had estates in Lancashire where they were neighbors of the Hoghtons. Shakespeare's marriage took place not in Stratford but at Temple Grafton, whose parish priest was reported to the authorities as an obdurate Catholic. Anne Hathaway's father, though apparently an Anglican, had a Catholic as one of his executors. Shakespeare had strong connections with Gray's Inn, which contained more Lancastrians than any other and had a high proportion of Catholic members. William Underhill, from whom Shakespeare bought New Place in 1597, was a Catholic recusant. Shakespeare's elder daughter, Susannah, was accused of recusancy in 1606, although the charge was later dropped.

Shakespeare's acquaintance with, even sympathy for, Catholics thus must be acknowledged, although there are difficulties in the way of the conclusion that he was one. He must have attended the Anglican church as required by law, for if he had not we would know about it; and "church papists" were not kindly regarded by their hardline co-religionists.[1] In the nature of things, Catholics were increasingly reticent after the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, and the Armada, and the Gunpowder Plot. True, Ben Jonson was a Catholic between approximately 1598 and 1610, but he was not famous for his tact. Shakespeare was always more elusive, even geographically. He shuttled between Stratford and London throughout his performing and writing career, sometimes leaving traces such as the Warwickshire of *The Taming of the Shrew*, or the little schoolboy William going through his Latin declensions in *The Merry Wives*. John Aubrey claimed that Shakespeare revisited Stratford only once a year, via Oxford, where he was said (on evidence Honan shows to be flimsy) to have fathered an illegitimate son, later the playwright Sir William Davenant.

Honan has to bring off some delicate balancing acts, judging what proportion of his book to give to critical accounts of the works, and how far to intertwine them with biography. There are some bold moves. The attack on materialism in *The Merchant of Venice* is attributed to Shakespeare's "revulsion at his affluence in the wake of his son's death," from which "he seems never to have recovered." The murder of Stratford's Mayor Richard Quiney in 1598, we are told, "helps to account for a deepening social pessimism" in such plays as *Troilus and Cressida* and *Timon of Athens*. Shakespeare's absences from home, and the consequently tense relationships with his two headstrong daughters, are dimly discerned beneath *King Lear*. But "the most tangled and contradictory of his relationships, one suspects, was with his mother." The sonnets appeared eight months after her death, and reveal, to Honan, an "obsession with sexual pollution or contamination" which links them with *Hamlet*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Timon*. If such flirting with Freudianism is risky, the declaration that the Bohemian episodes in *The Winter's Tale* reveal Shakespeare's "underlying disbelief in redemption" is disappointingly unimaginative for a critic elsewhere so quick to conjecture, and the statement that Shakespeare's outlook on humanity "comes at last to a darkening" in *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* shows that a streak of Romanticism can invade the most hard-headed of biographers.

Honan never forgets, however, that his subject was a practical man of the theater, and he is particularly good on Shakespeare's professionalism. Here is no divinely inspired warbler of native woodnotes wild: "he evidently took pains with scripts; he was a reviser, with a poet's concern for verbal style. He usually read omnivorously to

1 This neglected topic has lately been studied by Alexandra Walsham in *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (Royal Historical Society and the Boydell Press, 1993).

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make a play." Honan's biographical conjectures built on Shakespeare's career—"he could not have worked six months in the theatre without normal pluck and simple, shoulder-shrugging endurance"—are at least not contradicted by evidence, and his picture of Shakespeare—sensitive beneath a stoical exterior, discreet and adaptable, winning when necessary but with an actor's ability to be all things to all people—is vivid and plausible. Honan has some interesting speculations, too, on which roles Shakespeare may have acted in his own plays. Computer analysis points to Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, Antonio in *Twelfth Night*, Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, the Chorus in *Henry V*, among others, and claims to confirm the long traditions which assigned to him Adam in *As You Like It* and old Hamlet's ghost. "Anyway," Honan concludes with caution worthy of Chambers himself, "so much for theory. Facts are another matter."

In his brutal but haunting play *Bingo* (1973), Edward Bond has Shakespeare disenchanted with the human race, regarded with hostility for corrupt land deals by his Stratford neighbors, and estranged from his uncomprehending family. Finally, shutting himself in his room, he commits suicide by taking an overdose, asking repeatedly "Was anything done? Was anything done?" while his daughter scrabbles to locate his will. It is like a scene from an updated *Lear* (a comparison, as we saw above, which Honan actually invokes at one point); it does not square with the myth of "gentle Shakespeare," but Honan has presented a protean character, unattractive in many respects, and Bond may be more accurate than we would like to admit. The famous will is chiefly remarkable for what it omits: no books or manuscripts, "as if they did not greatly matter," although they may have been inventoried separately. They would presumably have gone to his elder daughter, Susannah, married to John Hall; and we hear of "Divers bookes" which were seized from the Halls by the bailiff in 1637. It is highly improbable that there are any lost masterpieces or revealing personal documents—and, after all, we have the works: what more do we want? But all the evidence is that we *do* want more, that we retire baffled from each attempt to discern a face behind all those voices. The direct line of descent died out, the man was subsumed by the myth, and the long procession of biographers began, each claiming to reveal the truth at last. To his credit, Park Honan knows, and says, that this is a self-delusion. All he can give us is *his* truth about Shakespeare—which is that he was a turbulent man, introspective, psychologically strained, intellectually alive even to the point of agony, tormented by the burden of his own perceptiveness, disquietingly a stranger to happiness or ease, and expressing his sense of life's complexities in works of art which, like himself, are both intimate and lonely.

A feeling of disjunction

Michael Cunningham The Hours.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 230 pages, $22

reviewed by Brooke Allen

A bunch of gay people in Greenwich Village unconsciously re-enacting Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*? It sounded like one of the worst ideas of all time. Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, though, proves once again that when a novelist has the right stuff, he can endow literally any subject with truth, poetry, and intelligence. The Pulitzer Committee, for once, made no mistake when it decided to award its 1999 prize for fiction to this relatively unknown author.

Cunningham has clearly steeped himself in Woolf's work and style without, thank God, letting the novel become in any way an imitation of her; it is more an echo or a parallel of *Mrs Dalloway*, or a dialogue with it, than an homage (to use a horrible word). Cunningham has a perfectly good voice of

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his own and a style blessedly innocent of the preciosity that was Woolf's principal artistic fault. He attacks the questions raised in *Mrs Dalloway* with thought and originality: *The Hours*, like its predecessor, is a meditation on age and decay, on sanity and insanity, on the nature of the creative act, on the ineradicable love for life that continues even in the face of a longing for death. Cunningham's thoughts on these subjects respond to Woolf's, but diverge from hers in provocative ways.

The Hours is really three separate stories, woven together in a very clever fashion, and each, like *Mrs Dalloway*, takes place on a single day in June. One of these involves Woolf herself, at Hogarth House in suburban London in 1923, working on the first draft of *Mrs Dalloway*, coping with family and servants, and contemplating death or some other form of escape from the loving captivity imposed by her husband, who is worried about her health and her sanity. (Cunningham draws heavily on both Woolfs' diaries and autobiographical writings.)

The second plot is the modern version of *Mrs Dalloway*: a day in the life of Clarissa Vaughan, a fifty-two-year-old book editor, successful and placidly content with her longtime lover Sally. In the particular world she inhabits, Clarissa, like Clarissa Dalloway, is in effect a conventional society wife, not so very different, really, from her heterosexual, married counterparts on Park Avenue. Character, Cunningham seems to imply, is destiny, and Clarissa Vaughan, who enjoys every personal liberty that Clarissa Dalloway did not, has ended up with just as dull a life. Clarissa is preparing for a party she is to throw that evening for her best and oldest friend, Richard, a poet in the last stages of AIDS who has just won a fancy literary prize. We accompany her as she shops for flowers, visits Richard, and receives visits in turn from her daughter and friends, and we watch as the evening brings her not the expected celebration but an unexpected tragedy.

The third story, which at first appears to have no connection with either of the others, takes place in 1949 and concerns a young Los Angeles wife and mother, Laura Brown. Solitary, contemplative, an obsessive reader, Laura should never have married, but she was caught up like many another in the philoprogenitive postwar climate. "In another world, she might have spent her whole life reading. But this is the new world, the rescued world—there's not much room for idleness. So much has been risked and lost; so many have died." When the war ended, Dan, the returning hero, proposed to her—and what could she say but yes? "She married him out of guilt; out of fear of being alone; out of patriotism. He was simply too good, too kind, too earnest, too sweet-smelling not to marry."

Now, with a house to look after, a husband she has nothing to say to and a terrifyingly needy three-year-old son, Laura has sunk into what a psychiatrist would term depression but what she, and Cunningham, might call despair. She is simply not equal to the emotional responsibilities she has taken on; she wants only to lie on her bed alone, reading *Mrs Dalloway*. The book is the reality (her bedroom "feels more densely inhabited, more actual, because a character named Mrs. Dalloway is on her way to buy flowers"), while her life is only the shadow; when she must, at last, get up and join the breakfast preparations downstairs, she is possessed "by a dreamlike feeling, as if she is standing in the wings, about to go onstage and perform in a play for which she is not appropriately dressed, and for which she has not adequately rehearsed."

As her day progresses, Laura, like Virginia Woolf, makes a brief feint at escape and contemplates suicide; and like Clarissa (in fact like both Clarissas), she prepares a party, in this case a birthday party for her husband, including a cake which fails to live up to her wish for perfection and has to be remade. At times her feeling of dislocation overwhelms her; at other times she succeeds in merging her real self with her ideal one, and "for a moment she is precisely what she appears to be: a pregnant woman kneeling in a kitchen with her three-year-old son. She is herself

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and she is the perfect picture of herself; there is no difference."

Virginia Woolf intended *Mrs Dalloway* to show "the world seen by the sane & the insane, side by side"; in her notes, she states one of her themes to be "Sanity & insanity. Mrs D seeing the sane truth. S[eptimus] S[mith] seeing the insane truth." Woolf demonstrates in her novel that both the sane and the insane are capable of penetrating to the truth, but that they are different truths. Cunningham's characters bring us to the same conclusion, and even a little further.

Clarissa Vaughan is the novel's sane character, as opposed to Richard, Laura, and "Virginia Woolf," all to one degree or another unbalanced. Her sanity consists in her being willing to find happiness in a reality that is less than it could have been, than what she once dreamed it might be. When she was eighteen and sharing a Cape Cod house with Richard, an impulsive kiss led to a brief love affair. At the end of the summer, though, she came to her senses. After all, they were both gay, weren't they? And Clarissa, also, "wanted her freedom and Richard wanted, well, too much, didn't he always? He wanted too much." Clarissa eventually settles down with a more appropriate mate, Sally, into a more humdrum life.

But as Clarissa ages, it seems to her that when she ended the affair with Richard she abandoned what might have been a "larger and stranger" life. Did she really? Or did the summer's magic lie more than anything in their youth and sense of infinite possibility —the simple fact that "Richard was the person Clarissa loved at her most optimistic moment"?

Clarissa will never know; still, at the time "it had seemed like the beginning of happiness, and Clarissa is still sometimes shocked, more than thirty years later, to realize that it *was* happiness. That was the moment, right then. There has been no other." But being sane Clarissa, rather than insane Richard who wants too much, she embraces what life has given her. Not that she doesn't have moments of alienation nearly as acute as Laura Brown's, moments where her familiar home seems like that of a stranger. Still, she gives love and support to her unexciting partner, goes through the social niceties, and is rewarded with moments of visceral joy that nothing can kill, as on this beautiful June morning. "What is the matter with her? She loves Richard, she thinks of him constantly, but she perhaps loves the day slightly more." The feeling of disjunction between the outer and the inner self that Clarissa feels only as a momentary tremor is for the novel's "insane" characters the very essence of existence, and each, in the end, proves incapable of enduring it.

To tell all this is only to give the faintest sense of the denseness of Cunningham's tale, its wealth of ideas, connections, allusions, and, not least, emotion. The final chapter, where he ties the three stories up into one suprising whole, is masterful. So is the description of Clarissa's evening, when the story's odd group of survivors sit in her living room partaking of the funeral baked meats that she had originally meant to serve as party hors d'oeuvres, and she reflects on the day behind them.

> We throw our parties; we abandon our families to live alone in Canada; we struggle to write books that do not change the world, despite our gifts and our unstinting efforts, our most extravagant hopes. We live our lives, do whatever we do, and then we sleep—it's as simple and ordinary as that. A few jump out of windows or drown themselves or take pills; more die by accident; and most of us, the vast majority, are slowly devoured by some disease, or, if we're very fortunate, by time itself. There's just this for consolation: an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we've ever imagined, though everyone but children (and perhaps even they) knows these hours will inevitably be followed by others, far darker and more difficult. Still, we cherish the city, the morning; we hope, more than anything, for more.

It will not have escaped Virginia Woolf

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fans that Laura Brown—"Mrs Brown"—bears the same name as the hypothetical fictional character in Woolf's famous essay "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," in which she takes to task her older contemporaries Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, and H. G. Wells for their lack of psychological depth. (I have always thought she did Wells and Bennett a great injustice; they had their own type of fiction and she had hers, and both are perfectly valid; but that is beside the point.) In naming his character Mrs. Brown, Cunningham in effect accepts Woolf's stated artistic challenge. He succeeds brilliantly; so much so that in the end he even gives Woolf herself a run for her money.

A shameful book

Ian Gibson
The Shameful Life of Salvador Dalí.
W. W. Norton & Company,
798 pages, $45

reviewed by Stephen Schwartz

The first difficulty in reviewing this book is that its subjects, Salvador and Gala Dalí, really were quite unappealing people: self-centered to the point of extreme pathology, greedy, and remarkably philistine. Ian Gibson has revealed their repulsive habits and extravagant excesses in submicroscopic detail. Much that we find objectionable about today's art scenes in New York, London, Paris, and elsewhere had its outstanding original incarnation in Dalí—above all, unrestrained self-advertisement as a substitute for creative application, such as has made Andy Warhol, Julian Schnabel, and Jeff Koons, among many others, infamous.

Yet Dalí and the academic Surrealist style he exemplifies remain, for all his many bad qualities, a significant component of twentieth-century art history—important enough that a serious examination of his place would be extremely useful. Gibson's bloated concoction has gained an astonishing degree of critical acclaim from reviewers and been accompanied by a similar video on television. Nevertheless, it is anything but the authoritative biography its author and publisher obviously hoped it would be.

To begin with, although it has been hyped as a definitive monograph comparable to John Richardson's biography of Picasso, this tome is not really a biography. It is a swollen polemic against its subject, concerned first and foremost with the scandalous—i.e., the "shameful"—aspects of Dalí's career, which the author has made his sole theme. Yet there is nothing original about such an approach, for once one accepts the basic premise of Dalí's life—flamboyant narcissism camouflaged as, among other things, "paranoiac criticism"—the rest follows logically and predictably, from the money-grubbing to the fascination with sexual depravity. In addition, one must ask if there is not an ethical problem involved in a production of this kind, one that relentlessly assaults the personal character of an artist while at the same time offering purchasers luxurious, full-color reproductions of the artist's main works.

The text of this book is a clip job. An Irish-born writer who has acquired Spanish nationality, Gibson has assembled his narrative by excerpting prior books on Dalí, and adding to that foundation news stories about the more ridiculous public displays engaged in by the artist during his decades-long decline, backed up by gossip-mongering interviews with minor characters. This volume would probably not have come into existence had Gibson not published a fairly successful book, *Federico García Lorca: A Life* (Pantheon 1997). That the poet wrote a long ode to Dalí, very likely during a sexually intimate relationship, made Dalí the obvious next target for Gibson. The author has lately announced that he will follow these titles with a study of the third member of this group of friends, the film director Luis Buñuel.

Gibson offers nothing new in the way of meaningful research on Dalí, although he has put together a lengthy list of aggravated

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complaints, which he considers a substitute for analysis. These "issues" mainly involve amateur psychologizing about Dalí's weird sex life, alleged shame caused by his purported homosexual tendencies, and guilt over the death of García Lorca.

García Lorca, who remains the outstanding figure in twentieth-century Spanish literature, died in obscure circumstances at the beginning of that country's civil war (1936–39). From the first report of García Lorca's death, the tragedy was blamed on "the Fascists." It is true that the poet was killed in the Andalusian city of Granada, under occupation by the troops of General Francisco Franco, a month after Franco's rebellion against the Spanish Republic had begun. But the ensuing propaganda campaign of the worldwide left falsely painted García Lorca as a Communist, or near-Communist, and asserted that he had been executed for political reasons. This has not been taken seriously in Spain itself for years, by scholars of either the right or the left. Whether his death was caused by politics, envy, a homosexual quarrel—for García Lorca was a rather flamboyant "queen"—or some unknown motive has never been established. Gibson is not concerned with factuality, but with legend—in particular the recusant "progressive" myth of Spanish Republican virtue and Francoist evil. Thus, García Lorca's death interests him because it is the easiest way to engage readers in the revival of Spanish leftist nostalgia.

His previous book, which he has repeatedly asserted "solved" the García Lorca mystery, actually did nothing of the sort. In investigating García Lorca's death, Gibson mainly accumulated vague statements from interviews long after the events, mostly with marginal personalities. Gibson seems unaware, in the García Lorca and Dalí cases alike, that the extensive archives of both sides in the Spanish Civil War are now open to historians; in any event, he cites nothing from them. That is because Gibson's purposes are much better served by the recycling of hearsay than by careful examination of primary documents. His central obsession regarding García Lorca and Dalí is simple: although the Fascists killed García Lorca, Dalí ended up supporting Franco, a despicable action, according to Gibson, for which Dalí felt, or should have felt, ashamed; and Dalí even had the nerve to return to Spain at the war's end. Further, because Picasso stayed in Paris and did not go back to Spain after Franco's victory, he is held up as morally and artistically superior to Dalí. Although this seems a ridiculously simplistic message to be clothed in so outsized a presentation, it really is all Gibson has to say.

In describing his painting *Autumn Cannibalism* as a reflection of the civil war, Dalí commented: "These Iberian beings devouring each other in the autumn express the pathos of civil war considered as a phenomenon of natural history, as distinct from Picasso, who considered it a political [phenomenon.]" This relatively anodyne statement elicits a huffing and puffing from Gibson that is typical of this book: "One looks in vain for any statement by Dalí supporting the Republic or condemning the infamous Non-Intervention Pact signed by the British and French governments while Germany and Italy were supplying aircraft and other equipment to Franco." A few pages later, Gibson adds,

> As the civil war raged on in Spain there could be no question of Dalí's returning to Catalunya, where, he must have felt, anything might happen to him. . . . Perhaps it was known that he had done nothing to help the Republic. Altogether there was no option but to wait until the hostilities ended, when, no matter who won, he would probably be able to talk himself out of any difficulties.

Gibson here commits several familiar sins borrowed from the methodology of "political correctness." First, he presumes to judge the whole Spanish intelligentsia based on whether or not they took specific positions during the civil war. Second, he assumes without evidence that the Republicans—or,

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for that matter, the Francoists—imposed such general political tests on intellectuals. In reality the García Lorca case, whatever its origins, was an exceptional one in wartime Spain. The Barcelona leftists committed numerous atrocities against the Catholic church and the propertied bourgeoisie, and the pro-Soviet Communists, as described by George Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia*, killed anti-Stalin leftists. But a considerable roster of right-wing Catalan intellectuals survived in Barcelona by keeping silent, as did a fairly substantial number of leftists in Franco territory. In neither the rebel nor the Republican zone were intellectuals routinely killed for insufficient support to the regime, hoary propaganda notwithstanding.

Furthermore, Dalí himself commented with remarkable common sense and sincerity on García Lorca's death:

> At the very outbreak of the revolution my great friend, the poet of *la mala muerte*, Federico García Lorca, died before a firing squad in Granada, occupied by the Fascists. His death was exploited for propaganda purposes. This was ignoble, for they knew as well as I that Lorca was by essence the most apolitical person on earth. Lorca did not die as a symbol of one or another political ideology; he died as a propitiatory victim of that total and integral phenomenon that was the revolutionary confusion in which the civil war unfolded.

But attention to the nuances and details of authentic Spanish civil war history—its truth, in a word—is entirely foreign to the personality of Ian Gibson. He is interested in a simple, ideological message: Franco and Dalí, bad; Republicans and Picasso, good. Above all, Gibson is the uncrowned emperor of the method that depends on the author's poorly informed surmises about others' motivations, supported by phrases like "he must have felt." This was his approach in investigating García Lorca's death and it is on full display here.

Gibson's affection for conventional wisdom and shopworn clichés is not limited to the topic of the Spanish Civil War. There is virtually no real art history in this book; the universe of painting consists, for Gibson, of Dalí and Picasso. The very interesting relationship between De Chirico's and Dalí's work is reduced by Gibson to little more than a single sneering line: "Dalí maintained that De Chirico, so admired by the Surrealists, had employed academic means to achieve his 'revolution of the anecdote.' So why should not he?" Otherwise, we are told that this or that detail in a Dalí painting showed De Chirico's influence, or was borrowed from him, but nothing more. For Gibson, De Chirico is far more important as a target of innuendo than as a predecessor of Dalí in Surrealist imagery. In the full grip of his habitual speculation, Gibson argues that Gala Dalí "probably" seduced Giorgio De Chirico. He produces no evidence of any kind for this claim, derived from nothing other than Gibsonian "insight."

Gibson's understanding of Surrealism—which would seem to be the main subtextual theme in the life of Dalí—is no better than what might be acquired in a one-semester survey course in twentieth-century art history. He knows the highlights, but that is where his scholarship ends. That academic Surrealism represented an artistic dead end, that the succeeding generation of painters, in France, the United States, and Spain turned away from Surrealism in large part because of the insipid outcome of Dalí's career, should have been a major topic in this book. But about such matters Gibson is mute. To Gibson, the painters and poets with whom Dalí was associated are mere names, except when they are subjects of spurious, as well as salacious, "revelations." In this reading, whether García Lorca was really a leftist martyr is far less relevant than whether Amanda Lear, a hanger-on of the Dalís in the 1960s, was or was not a transsexual.

In discussing Dalí's paintings, Gibson applies the inventory method of criticism, combining it with his persistent parlor Freudianism. The index of this book includes, under the heading "Dalí, Salvador,

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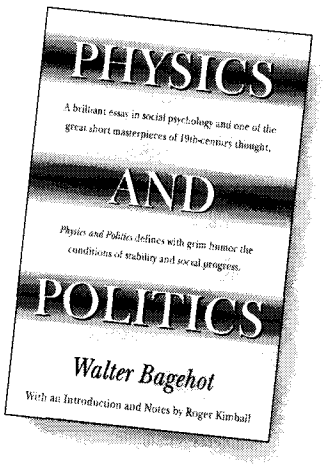
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works of," such items as "ants in," "breasts in," "fellatio in," "gadgets in," "keys in," "lions in," "locusts in," "masturbation in," "parrot-nose in," and "shadows in," along with references to various places and relatives.

One must imagine with horror how such a system would be applied to the work of Dalí's mentor Joan Miró. But of course, that is the point: a book on Miró, especially a large-format volume of hundreds of pages with rich reproductions, would have to be accompanied by serious critical writing. Gibson believes such writing is superfluous in the Dalí case, and, unfortunately, he has been proven to some extent correct in this assumption.

Gibson castigates Dalí for going back to Spain in 1940, under Franco. But Gibson never mentions, and obviously does not know or care, that Miró, who had done much more than most Spanish artists to assist the Republic, moved from France to Mallorca the same year. There he went unmolested, even though the island was one of the first places in Spain to fall to Franco's forces and remains even today a bastion of Francoist tradition. Gibson also endorses André Breton's condemnation of Dalí for rallying to Franco. But he does not know or care that Breton was equally if not more critical of Picasso's loyalty to the Stalinist French Communist Party in the late 1950s, "even after Budapest," in the words of the Surrealist founder. Similarly, while Gibson adulates Picasso for refusing to go back to Francoist Spain, he never considers the possibility that there was something morally compromising about Picasso's remaining in Nazi-occupied Paris throughout World War II. After all, both Dalí and Miró went to Spain to escape the German invasion of France. Gibson is so Picassophilic he even jeers at a naïve but harmless opinion of the author Stefan Zweig, who introduced Dalí to Freud. Gibson declares, "Zweig told Freud that in his opinion Dalí was 'the only painter of genius of our epoch, and the only one who will survive.' It was as though Zweig had never heard of Picasso."

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A critical comparison of the careers of Dalí and Miró, against the background of the very distinctive Catalan culture as embodied in Barcelona, would be extremely valuable. But to Gibson, even Miró is a cipher, treated herein only as a supporter of Dalí. That Miró, older than Dalí, contributed a great deal more to the education of the painters who succeeded them is beneath consideration by Gibson. He notes that the 1941 Museum of Modern Art retrospective of the two elicited an eloquent comment from Robert M. Coates, writing in *The New Yorker*: "Going from the Dalí section to the Mirós is like moving from some dark, solemn chamber—say, a room where clinical photographs are being studied—to the gaiety and light of a children's nursery." But even this invitingly open door stimulates nothing from Gibson but utterly flat phrases about Surrealism's accommodation of "both the dark and light sides of human nature."

The culture of Catalonia—not only incredibly sophisticated, reflecting considerable wealth and past cultural achievement, but also incredibly provincial—embodied these "dark and light" aspects and might have provided a beginning point for an intelligent survey of these two careers. But Gibson is ignorant of Catalan culture and he is contemptuous of it. He writes as a resident of Granada, in Andalucía, and therefore as a "real Spaniard" who hates Catalans. In what seems a self-parodying exercise in Irish humor reminiscent of Flann O'Brien, he tells us that

> Other Spaniards consider Catalans the country's meanies (the Scotsmen of Spain), as is shown by thousands of jokes on the subject, and it is a fact that Catalunya is the only part of Spain where people do not buy rounds of drinks, for example, and the fact that there are more savings banks in Catalunya than in all the rest of Spain has already been alluded to.

This comment summarizes the pathos of Ian Gibson's book. He wants to be a Gerald Brenan or Robert Graves—an expatriate from the British Isles who delves brilliantly in the Iberian culture he has adopted—but he has much more in common with Hemingway on a bad day. Thus, although Gibson frequently mistranslates simple Spanish and Catalan words and phrases, he also revels in pseudocritical "corrections." For example, he jabs at the British poet Francis Scarfe, whom he fails to detect behind a misprint identifying him in the English-language edition of Dalí's 1937 pamphlet, *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, as "Scarpe." Scarfe, according to Gibson, mistranslated the Spanish word "desembarcadero," taken from a poem of García Lorca, as "wharves," when Gibson would prefer "landing stage." But "desembarcadero" can mean either "wharves" or "docks" or "waterfront," while in contemporary English, "landing stage" is clumsy and unfamiliar. Many of the footnotes accompanying this book are similarly pretentious and dubious.

Did Dalí live a shameful life? In some respects, yes. He was inordinately selfish, cruel, manipulative, opportunistic, unprincipled, and disloyal. Does he deserve condemnation for not accepting his putative homosexuality? No; such a claim, repeatedly made in this book, reflects nothing other than Gibson's pandering to current fashion. Should Dalí have felt guilt for his Francoism? Perhaps, but no more than Picasso should have felt for his unrepentant Stalinism. Perhaps Dalí deserves no better than the shambles Gibson has created, but art history assuredly does.

Book notes

Dan Jacobson Heshel's Kingdom. Northwestern University Press, 243 pages, $24.95

In 1919, at the age of fifty-three, Heshel Melamed, the rabbi of the *shtetl* of Varniai and a Lithuanian Jew of great faith and will, died suddenly of heart failure, leaving his wife and nine children penniless and help-

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less. It was the kindest thing he ever did for them, says his grandson, Dan Jacobson—but for none of the grotesque reasons one usually says such things. Heshel's dying was kind because the history of this century has been murderously cruel. Had the good rabbi lived, he and his family would, in all certainty, have stayed on in Varniai, and so they would have perished, as did the rest of their *shtetl*, in the summer of 1941, victims of the Nazis and their Lithuanian accomplices. But Heshel died—and in doing so he gave the gift of life: the family soon relocated to Kimberley, a mining town in South Africa, the New Land then for tens of thousands of European Jews. There Heshel's children, safe from Hitler, married and prospered, giving him twelve grandchildren, twenty-six great-grandchildren, and, to date, ten great-great-grandchildren, living today in England, Israel, and the United States.

"On one side of the ocean, death. On the other, life. The gulf between those swallowed by the catastrophe in Europe and those who escaped it is unbridgeable," writes Jacobson. "A commensurate gulf yawns between the catastrophe itself and the words I have to use in speaking of it." *Heshel's Kingdom* is one writer's attempt to span such gulfs, to open his imagination to the horror of the Holocaust, and to begin to pay his debt to those who have gone before him. It is, above all, an attempt to build an intimate imaginative bridge between two human mysteries, between the unknown, unknowable grandfather and whatever may yet exist of him—his personality, his states of mind, his habits of perception—in the grandson's own imperfectly knowable self.

There is mastery—a certainty of technique, tone, and structure—in Jacobson's account of his journey in search of Heshel and his world. It begins in a meditation on the few personal effects the rabbi left behind—his glasses, his address book, and a formal photographic portrait in which the author seems able to meet his steady yet vulnerable gaze. It deepens in interviews with Heshel's children—Jacobson's mother, his uncles and aunts—and in bits of autobiography and historical research. It broadens immeasurably—and becomes almost unbearably immediate—in a record of the author's trip to present-day Lithuania. In Vilnius, Jacobson tours the Jewish Museum, where official Nazi documents relating to "the solution to the Jewish problem" are displayed alongside photographs of unspeakable atrocities, and where the curators speak softly, through an interpreter, to silent busloads of German visitors. On the outskirts of Kaunus, at the Nazi prison camp known as Fort IX, Jacobson walks the three-acre field that was once the mass grave of 30,000 Jews, whose corpses, in late 1943, were exhumed and then, in an attempt to erase the very fact of them, cremated; "naturally the Nazis employed squads of Jews for the task, all of whom were shot"—and their bodies burned—"after the job was finished." At last he comes to Varniai, where he searches, in vain, for Heshel's grave, in what, until 1941, had been the Jewish cemetery there.

"How I would have felt if I had found his stone . . . is something I cannot guess at," Jacobson writes. "I do know, though, that my failure to do so did not dishearten or disappoint me. On the contrary. I had come close enough to it, and to him. He was where he belonged, hidden among the remains of the people who for centuries had preceded him and of those who had followed him: the last to have been allowed to take their place alongside him, in named, individual graves. He himself had accompanied many of the families of the dead to this spot, and had led the last prayers for them there."

In the end Jacobson is content to let Heshel go, to allow him to rest in peace in his rightful kingdom, "that region where shadows give way to unchanging darkness." He does not come very much closer to understanding his grandfather, or even himself or the horrors of this sad century. What he does do, and brilliantly, is pay Heshel the honor of this act of compassionate remem-

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brance—of naming his grave, as it were. "His life and his death (together!) were indispensable to my existence," Jacobson writes. Now Jacobson, through writing this book, has made himself indispensable to Heshel's.

Ian Hamilton A Gift Imprisoned: The Poetic Life of Matthew Arnold. Basic Books, 241 pages, $24

Who was the poet Matthew Arnold, the true poet who wrote "Dover Beach," "The Buried Life," and the lyrics addressed to Marguerite, masterpieces that, in Ian Hamilton's words, "gave haunting public voice to private failures of belief," that recognized "the whole, godless indirection of the age but . . . refused to offer any balm"? Who was this Victorian harbinger of modernism, who, like his hero Empedocles, "sees things as they are—the world as it is," and who, in his best poems, speaks to the disorder of that world with an immediacy unrivalled by any of his contemporaries? And why, after writing these poems, did he turn away from describing things-as-they-are and begin to prescribe the ideal things-that-should-be? Why did he, in his later verse, become something false—"a pedagogic neo-classicist," a writer of "the kind of large-scale, objective, architectonic verse-constructions which he himself had no real gift for," grandiose epics that defied the despairing confusions of the age with "a chin-forward missionary striving"? And why, at last, in middle age, did he abandon poetry altogether for "purposeful" critical prose?

It is one of the great literary puzzles, a glove thrown down to the critic, the biographer, and the cultural historian. Ian Hamilton, happily, is all three, and also, when the situation demands one, a wit. He has written, with concision and insight and an attractive dry humor, an important revaluation of Arnold's poetry. It is also an investigation into the sources of Arnold's maddening ambivalence toward all that we find most valuable in his verse.

As a creative artist, Hamilton argues, Matthew Arnold's great handicap was that he was born Matthew Arnold, the eldest son of the most celebrated headmaster in England. As any reader of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* knows, Thomas Arnold's Rugby was the wheel on which England's future leaders were shaped by the hand of a fond, demanding tyrant, a man whom Tom Brown would recall as striving, "with all his heart and soul and strength, . . . against all that was mean and unmanly and unrighteous in our little world." In short, a man of great energy and always-purposeful activity, with few doubts about the good that he was doing his boys and, through them, his God and his country. How could young Matt dare disappoint such a father? How, in the light of the old man's achievement, could his own "private failures of belief" be seen as anything but a shameful weakness, and his giving voice to them anything but mean, unmanly, unrighteous, and ultimately destructive?

The Master of Rugby died in 1842, when Matthew was twenty-four. For the next twenty years, Arnold tried to live the poetic life. At last he repudiated it, in 1868, when he turned forty-six—his father's age at his death. "As Arnold came to see things," writes Hamilton, "an all-out commitment to his art woud have involved 'an actual tearing of oneself to pieces.' It might also have involved some other kinds of damage —to people, to principles, to his ingrained sense of social purpose": damage, especially, to the legacy of his father.

"And would it have been worth it after all?" Hamilton is tortured by this last question. When he reads "Dover Beach," that "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" he hears is the sound of Arnold's withdrawing his poetical gift from the world. It's his achievement in this book to make us hear it, too.

—*Christopher Carduff*

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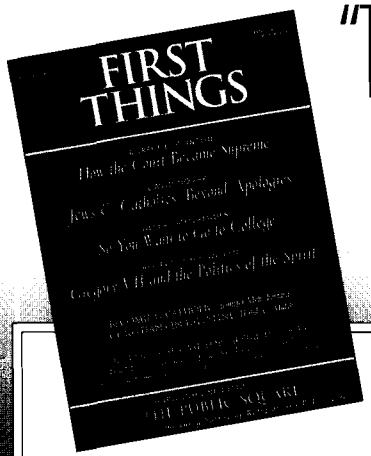

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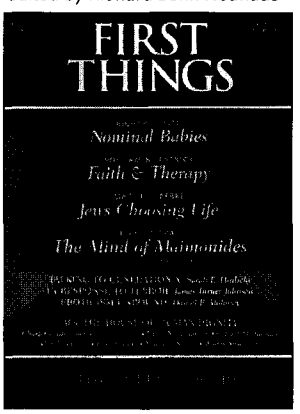

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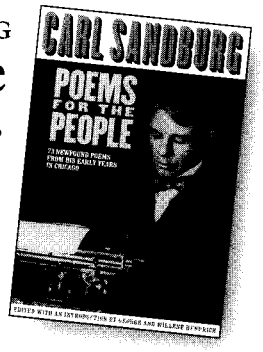

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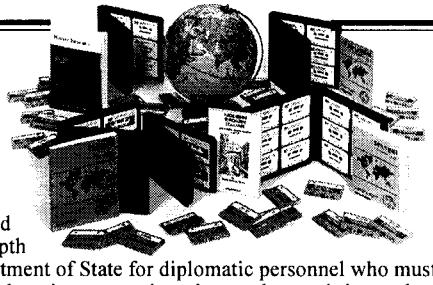

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